MARTY

John Strange Winter.

AUTHOR OF

"THE TRUTH-TELLERS"

"A NAME TO CONJURE WITH"

&c. &c.

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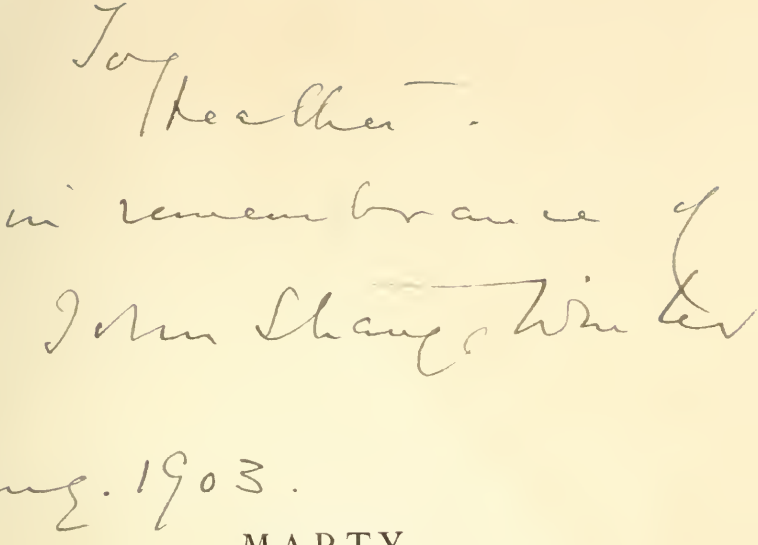

MARTY

MARTY

A Novel

BY

JOHN STRANGE WINTER

AUTHOR OF

"BOOTLES' BABY," "THE TRUTH-TELLERS," "HEART AND SWORD,"
"INTO AN UNKNOWN WORLD," "A MATTER OF SENTIMENT,"
"A BLAZE OF GLORY," "CONNIE THE ACTRESS." ETC.

FIFTH EDITION

LONDON

F. V. WHITE & CO. LTD.

14 BEDFORD STREET, STRAND, W.C.

1903

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To

MY GODCHILD

SHEILA BETTY HUMFREY DEELEY

I AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATE

THE STORY OF

"MARTY"

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1903

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MARTY

CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNING OF MARTY

MARTY was very young. Now, there is a great difference in youth. Some people are never young; with others youth is an evanescent quality, and others again are young as long as they live. Marty was one of these.

She began life in London; indeed, I think only in London could such a being as Marty ever have evolved itself out of the common ruck of humanity, for London is a wonderful hotbed, and brings forth many and varied types of men and women. Where will you find the equal in sharpness and wit of your London omnibus driver? Perhaps only in the person of the boy who sells newspapers and matches at the corners of the streets.

But the wonders of London production are not confined to the class which provides either omnibus drivers or newspaper vendors; one can go higher up in the social scale and find types of true-bred Londoners as far out of the run of ordinary humanity as the omnibus driver and the newspaper boy. And Marty was one of these. As I said, it happened

when she was very young. What happened? Well, the love-story of Marty Benyon.

Her earliest recollections were of a back parlour in Great Castle Street. You perhaps know that delectable spot, my reader—the long dingy row of houses, so tall that they seem to have been built with the special view of shutting out every possibility of a gleam of sunlight; so featureless that, excepting for the lower storeys, it is not possible to tell one from another; so noisy, so bustling, and yet teeming with the class of life that is not especially interesting or desirable.

Marty was born in the thirty-third of this little-to-be-desired row of houses. Her father was a quantity which does not enter into the necessities of this story. Before Marty was ten years old, Mr Benyon had been carried away to the long and narrow home in which he would lie until the Day of Judgment. His widow made a great profession of grief, but she was a busy woman, and had not only Marty, but two little girls of four and five years old, entirely dependent upon her; and after the day of the funeral she expressed herself simply, and with a certain dignity, to the effect that, "People that have children depending on them can't afford to sit down and wipe their eyes with a black-bordered handkerchief." So Mrs Benyon set herself to be up and doing, and as the business which occupied the large room with two windows, situated at the left-hand side of the entrance-door of number thirty-three Great Castle Street had been hers, and entirely separate from her husband's estate, she continued to attend to it as heretofore, and as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

The business was one of deep interest to the feminine population; that is to say, Mrs Benyon conducted a second-hand clothes business—not the class of goods that reeked of old memories or was in any way offensive to the senses, but a respectable up-to-date establishment, whose clients were on the one hand the tirewomen of ladies of rank and fashion, and on the other ladies whose object in life was to understudy the fashions with as small an outlay as possible.

"You know, Mrs Benyon," said one of her customers, not very long after the demise of the respectable Robert, "you really ought to move into a better neighbourhood. You can't want this great house."

"I don't, madam," said Mrs Benyon, "I want a house just half the size. I'm always in trouble with my tenants, and they are far more nuisance than they are worth. But what am I to do? I can't afford to leave the upper part empty, and apparently they can't afford to pay their rent, and between the two, I'm always on the wrong side."

"Why don't you move? Why don't you go to a better locality, where you would have more chance of getting good clients?"

"I find no fault with my clients, madam," said Mrs Benyon. "Where ladies find good things, there they will go to look for them again. If a lady goes into Regent Street or Bond Street she has to pay accordingly. Here she finds Regent Street and Bond Street at Great Castle Street prices."

"But if you could get a small house?" persisted the lady.

"If I could get a small house for what this costs

me, I would move to-morrow," said Mrs Benyon, decidedly; "as it is, I haven't the time to look out for a place. I have three little girls, madam, and if Marty didn't happen to be as sharp as a needle and as good as gold, and as dependable as a woman, I think I should have gone over Waterloo Bridge long since. As it is, I must just worry on until something happens, or until a likely place drops in my way."

"Now, look here, Mrs Benyon," said the other, quietly, "I am a woman of limited means—I can't afford to spend large sums on my clothes, and I don't know that I would if I could—but I have plenty of time, and I'll look you out a few places. There's no obligation to move, you can take them or leave them, but I'll spend a few afternoons looking round likely neighbourhoods and seeing whether there are any vacant houses that would be likely to suit you."

Mrs Benyon expressed herself in suitable terms of gratitude. And she really was grateful. Believe me, if you wish to render a service to somebody who will thoroughly appreciate it, go to a busy man or woman, to whom time is money and spare hours an unknown luxury, and do something for them which they have no time to do for themselves. Such a kindness is never thrown away, and Mrs Benyon expressed herself, as I said, in suitable and cordial terms of gratitude and thankfulness.

"Believe me, madam," she said, "you are one of the kindest of my ladies. I have always thought highly of you, and many's the bargain I'll put in your way, as you'll see later on. I should," she went on, droping her voice to a more confidential tone, "I should be glad to get out of Great Castle Street. You see, my Marty is nearly ten years old, and it's high time

I began to think seriously of her future. When I was maid to the Duchess of Yorkshire," Mrs Benyon continued, "I used to take note of the way the young ladies were brought up, and I made up my mind then that if ever I had a little girl of my own there were some things I would and some things I wouldn't do in the training of her. My lines led me into Great Castle Street, and in Great Castle Street I have been stuck and might stick to the end of my days. If you can find me a suitable place, Mrs Browne, I shall bless you more on Marty's account than I shall on my own."

Whether it was from some feeling of *amour propre*, or whether it was from a consciousness that she would be doing a service to Marty, I cannot say, but Mrs Browne, being as she had herself said, a woman of leisure, set out on her quest the very day after her conversation with Mrs Benyon had taken place. When one sets out in London or the neighbourhood in search of a new domicile, the task is one which may well be dignified by the name of a quest. It is as the quest of the Holy Grail. One starts with a light heart, hope running high, and good luck in the ascendency; one frequently returns chilled to the bones, both of one's body and soul.

Mrs Browne had many conditions to fulfil in her quest. The rent must not be more, as Mrs Benyon expressed it, than the premises which she used in Great Castle Street "stood her to"; the neighbourhood must be convenient for her clients; the children yearned for a bit of garden; and Mrs Benyon wanted a kitchen on the ground floor, but this was not a *sine qua non*.

At last, after weeks of patient search, Mrs Browne

lighted on what she declared was the exact thing—a small semi-detached house off the Hammersmith Road in that portion of London which describes itself as "West." The rent of the villa was forty-five pounds a year, it had a diminutive scrap of garden in the rear boasting of two lilac trees and a laburnum, a patch of scrappy turf and a great many smuts; it had also a kitchen on the ground floor. Eventually Mrs Browne carried off the purveyor of fashions to see her find. She was modestly enthusiastic herself, knowing full well that, setting aside the question of neighbourhood, the house was all that could be desired. I had almost said that Mrs Benyon was neither modest nor enthusiastic, but that scarcely conveys what I really mean. She was certainly not modest or retiring in expressing her wants. She considered that forty pounds a year was an excellent rent to pay for a house such as she wanted. Perhaps, had she been born a little higher in the social scale, she would have thought it polite to be more enthusiastic than she was; possibly she had a vague idea that Mrs Browne might have some slight collusion with the owner of the selected abode; be that as it may, her remarks while she was in the empty house were distinctly unencouraging, and if I tell the truth I am fain to confess that more than once the lady who had found the delectable family residence known as No. 28 Rosediamond Road experienced a sudden sense of restriction about the throat such as is not unusual to feminine natures who feel themselves thoroughly snubbed.

In the end, however, Mrs Benyon accompanied Mrs Browne to the house agent who had the arranging of the property, and having thoroughly disparaged

every nook and corner, having driven the hardest of all hard bargains as regards matters of papering, painting, whitewashing, chimney-cleaning, garden-tidying, roof-overhauling and other possibilities relating to house property, she took No. 28 Rose-diamond Road on a three years' agreement, and Great Castle Street was doomed to pass into the things that had been and would be no more.

That night when the little girls were in bed, when the shutters in the front room had been decorously closed, and the bit of supper which was Mrs Benyon's greatest indulgence was set upon the sitting-room table, Mrs Benyon took Marty into her confidence.

"Now, Marty," she said, "I want to have a plain talk to you, and a straight talk to you. You and me are going to turn over a new leaf; you and me —and particularly you—have got to forget that we ever heard of such a place as Great Castle Street in all our days — you and me are going into what's almost private life. I'm going to live in a private house, I'm going to do a genteel business upstairs, right out of sight, and, so far as you children are concerned, everything depends upon what sort of an example you set to your sisters. From the day that we go out of Great Castle Street, Marty, you will remember that you are a young lady."

CHAPTER II

NO. 28 ROSEDIAMOND ROAD

FROM the day that Mrs Benyon took possession of No. 28 Rosediamond Road she never, in a worldly sense, looked behind her. The business, which had flourished and thriven in the undesirable atmosphere of Great Castle Street, grew like Jonah's gourd when it reached the genteel locality wherein Mrs Benyon had pitched her tent.

Mrs Benyon was a woman of remarkable decision of character. In her younger days she had ruled that great lady, the Duchess of Yorkshire, with a rod not of iron but of cold steel, and from the moment that she became the mistress of No. 28 Rosediamond Road she never flinched or swerved from the course which she had set before her. The faithful old servant who had been with her since the birth of Madge, the elder of the two little girls, was not now the sole domestic of the establishment; a younger servant took charge of the rougher work, leaving Sarah free to aid her mistress in the business, and Sarah was bound over by a string of fearful oaths to reveal nothing to the newcomer of Mrs Benyon's history or the details of her past life.

For her part, Marty had no longer definite duties as the warden and caretaker of her younger sisters; on the contrary, she now went to a genteel day-school,

and the two little girls to the nearest kindergarten. They bloomed out into a prefix before their name, and never went out without their hats on; as to playing in the street, I am sure that Mrs Benyon would have fainted at the mere suggestion of such a thing, although she had put up with it happily enough in Great Castle Street, when they had nothing but a dingy backyard in which the children could take recreation, and miles of streets lay between them and a blade of grass. No one who had seen the three little girls, well dressed and well cared for, go off from the neatly-kept house with its smart lace curtains and its pretty flower-boxes to their respective schools, would have believed it possible that six months before they had from time to time grubbed in the gutters of Great Castle Street with all the relish of street arabs. But, as Mrs Benyon expressed herself to the excellent Sarah, "what had to be had to be, and it's silly to go on doing things when one needn't."

So the years went on, and Marty quite forgot the old times and became a young lady, as her mother had intended her to be. Sarah would no more have dreamed of calling her anything but "Miss Marty" than she would have tried to fly; and Ada, long ago married and replaced by a competent cook, would have found it hard to believe that Miss Marty had ever done anything to soil her dainty fingers.

So time went on until Marty was fifteen years old. Then her mother hardened her heart and sent her from home to an expensive boarding-school at Folkestone, and there she remained for a couple of years. At this school Marty learned many things. She learned to talk a little English French, to dance very

well, to sing quite prettily, and to do various kinds of needlework. She also acquired—it was a speciality of the school—a knowledge of domestic bookkeeping and management.

Was Marty pretty? Well, no, I can't say that she was. She was a little person, round of figure, slender of throat, dainty as to her hands and feet. She had plenty of shining light brown hair, a pert little face, a constellation of dimples, and a smile so ready and so expansive that it completely cloaked the fact that her mouth was wider than accorded with the strictest canons of beauty. She was fair, with an inclination to freckle. Her nose was pert, even nondescript: and she had excellent taste in dress. This might have been due to the fact that the habiliments of a certain duchess, well-known in the great world, fitted Miss Marty to a nicety; so much so that Mrs Benyon always gave her daughter the first choice of any fresh consignment from the maid of "the little Duchess," as they always called her at Rosediamond Road.

Had Fate not ordained otherwise, Marty might have become a great factor in her mother's business. Mrs Benyon, indeed, had always planned and projected that Marty should become her right-hand man, but Providence frequently disposes other than man proposes, and in Marty's case fate ordained that she should not find her *métier* in life as a purveyor of fashions. I do not know whether I have fully explained that Mrs Benyon's business was of a strictly private nature. No gowns like spectres of the past hung in her sitting-room window, no door-plate disfigured her house; she never advertised or issued leaflets to be handed from door to door; she relied

simply and solely on what she herself called a "private connection," on the belief that one lady, who would be a butterfly and was content to buy the cast-off chrysalis of a more brilliant butterfly than herself at a price which was absurd when compared with that which had originally been given, should tell another lady, and she others, until like the snowball the name of Benyon was spread through the land, not noised abroad, but spread stealthily and as a personal favour to those who heard.

The two large bedrooms on the first floor of No. 28 were entirely devoted to business purposes. There was a tiny slip of a room over the hall, in which Mrs Benyon slept. There was a single room at the back of the upper storey, a room under the gables, and in this the two maid-servants reposed; while of the two front rooms, which had a communicating door between them, Marty occupied the larger of the two, while the younger girls, who were only home during the holidays, shared the other. For after the return of Marty, Mrs Benyon had somewhat launched out, and had packed off Madge and Teresa to the school at Folkestone which had done such great things for their sister.

I have described Marty Benyon's personal appearance; to describe her mind is a task of much more difficulty. I think the dominant note of her whole disposition was that of youth. She was so young, so bubbling over with that delightful quality of juvenescence which, as a rule, lasts so short a time, scarce longer than the rose-blush upon the cheek of girlhood. Another of Marty's qualities was her plain outspokenness. She kept nothing back; with her to think was to say. It had its inconveniences—

what good quality has not?—but the frankness of her speech was a good match for the freshness of her face. It was strange that Marty should have been the child of her father and mother. The defunct Mr Benyon, who had filled a respectable niche in life in a manner which had won the esteem of all who knew him, had been a person of singularly indefinite parts, who had always looked upon his wife as the "grey mare" who was indisputably the better horse. If the excellent Sarah had asked him whether he would like a second egg for his breakfast, he would certainly have replied, "You had better ask the missis!" And it is on record that once, when his brother-in-law suggested that they should take a walk as far as Hendon one fine holiday morning, Robert Benyon had promptly called up the stairs to his better half, with the words: "Charlotte! Mother! Am I likely to be wanted this morning? George wants me to walk up to Hendon with him!"

As for Mrs Benyon, although she was a woman of very decided character, she was not, and never had been, troubled by any originality, either in her views or her disposition. She had fixed principles in life, and would as soon have thought of trying to tweak her nose off her face as of facing Shrove Tuesday without pancakes. Another of her rules of life was summed up in the old-fashioned adage, "Least said soonest mended." Indeed, Mrs Benyon had a way of shutting her mouth like a steel trap, of turning off the steam of her speech, so to speak, of doing it in a way which conveyed that wild horses wouldn't extract another single word out of her. And the child of this couple was Marty; Marty, who prefaced every remark with a smile; Marty, who saw the

humorous side of every situation; Marty, who rapped out one smart little speech after another without having the least idea that she was saying anything out of the ordinary. Truly the ways of Nature are most extraordinary!

Now Marty had been at home nearly two months when something happened. It was a dull January afternoon, business for the day was over, for Mrs Benyon's hours for receiving clients were those between eleven and four. Mrs Benyon was enjoying her afternoon tea and some hot buttered toast. It was really the first comfortable meal of the day. Breakfast she partook of as a solid duty, one which would carry her through until the welcome tea and toast, which she could enjoy without fear of being disturbed by "a lady who wants to see you most particularly, and hasn't a minute to spare." "No, I wasn't at lunch, I assure you," said Mrs Benyon one day to a lady who greeted her entrance with a compunctious apology for disturbing her at that meal. "I used to get my lunch years ago, but I gave it up, for I never was able to enjoy it without getting up three or four times. So now I have just a sandwich and a glass of stout, and it doesn't matter if I eat that standing or not."

Well, as I said, Mrs Benyon was seated near to the fire in her little drawing-room, looking over the newspaper, and enjoying her tea and toast, when the door opened and Marty came in.

"Ah, is that you, Marty?" she remarked, although the fact was obvious.

"Yes, darling," Marty replied.

It was one of the habits that Marty had picked up at Folkestone, a habit of calling everybody by some

term of endearment, generally the one that she used then. "Yes, darling," she said, "and I've got such a piece of news for you. Amabel Leigh has asked me to go to a ball with her—and her mother, of course—on Thursday week."

"To a ball?" said Mrs Benyon, doubtfully.

"It's a subscription ball, darling," Marty went on, throwing off her fur-trimmed coat, and drawing an easy chair up to the other side of the hearth. "Yes, I'll have some tea, darling, thank you. I thought I should be in time for it. Well, this ball, it's a subscription ball at the Beatrice Rooms—guinea tickets—and Amabel has had two given her, so she's asked me to go with her."

Mrs Benyon's thoughts turned to business immediately. "You had better have that pink and silver dress of the little Duchess," she remarked.

"Too old," said Marty, unhesitatingly, "much too old. There's a little white *crêpe* dress, with a bit of silver embroidery across the front of the bodice."

"I thought that wouldn't be good enough."

Marty helped herself to a bit of toast, and looked at her mother with laughing eyes. "It's better to be not good enough than to be too good, darling," she remarked. "There's plenty of time to get the little white dress cleaned if it needs it. It's astonishing," she went on, "how fond the Duchess is of silver. I suppose because she's fair."

CHAPTER III

THE INEVITABLE YOUNG MAN

In due course of time Marty, arrayed in the white *crêpe* frock which had once graced the person of "the little Duchess," made her *début* in the world of fashion. She was an unqualified success. No, I don't mean to say that she went straight away and fascinated a duke, or that she was the only girl in the ballroom who had an unlimited supply of partners, but she was very much admired, and she had as many partners as she had dances, which, after all, is as much as any girl need wish in that direction.

She came home, duly escorted by Mrs Leigh and Amabel, at something after four o'clock in the morning, and Mrs Benyon, who, if I tell the truth, had not been in personal touch with a fashionable ball since the old days, almost forgotten, when she had been head tirewoman to the Duchess of Yorkshire, got out of bed, and, turning up her little gas fire, insisted upon making Marty a cup of tea.

"I really don't know that I want it, darling," said Marty, who was full of compunction at her mother's unselfishness, "I really don't know that I want it."

"Yes, yes," said Mrs Benyon, "you will be the better for it. When I was young," she added, "and had to do with balls, it was always a cup of tea that

was the thing best liked and most looked for. Besides, I want to hear how you enjoyed it, and whether your frock was all right among the others, and—"

"Oh, mother!" cried Marty, "you know that lovely blue dress of Lady Rickmansworth's?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was there!"

"You don't say so! There now, did you ever hear the like of that! And now tell me, Marty, what did Amabel wear?"

"Oh, she wore the pink frock. You see, it wasn't her coming out."

"No, no," said Mrs Benyon; "and that was a pretty frock, the pink one. And your partners, Marty—were there any young gentlemen there that you liked?"

Marty beamed all over her piquant face. "That water's boiling, darling," she said. "No, I'll put it in the pot."

"No, no," said Mrs Benyon, "sit there and tell me about the young gentlemen. You needn't dirty your frock; it looks so nice and fresh. Sit you there."

"Well," said Marty, taking up the story with relish, "there were three or four for the matter of that that were nice, but there was one, mother—oh, darling, he was a gem!"

"There now!" said Mrs Benyon. "See what it is to go out in the world and have chances. I always did say when I read the Society papers and I see Lady This and the Duchess of That praised up as being such lovely women, I always did say that it was opportunity and nothing else that made them 'My Lady' and the Duchess."

"Yes," said Marty, "it's a great thing to have opportunity. That is what I felt to-night when Mr

Etherington was brought up to me. I don't know how many times I danced with him," she said, with a happy little giggle at the remembrance of the wholesale way in which she had flirted with the said Mr Etherington. "But Amabel's mother did whisper at last that I wasn't to make myself too conspicuous with him, and so we retired into the conservatory, and there we sat through the next three or four dances. I've had a great time, darling," she said, leaning back in her chair and staring in a contemplative way at the gas fire, "yes, I've had a great time."

"Well, that's what you went for. And, tell me, how did Amabel get on?"

"Oh, all right. You see, she had all her own boys there. Charley Hurst made himself a bit of a nuisance, but Amabel puts up with it very willingly. You see, darling," said Marty, stirring her tea round and taking little delicate sips between her words, "you see, darling, when a girl's in the way of going about, she naturally has her own young men, her own partners, those who know her step, those who like her and whom she likes; but the first time a girl goes to a ball she has to say 'Yes, if you please,' and 'Thank you' for whatever comes in her way."

"But you liked what came in your way, Marty?" said Mrs Benyon, rather wistfully.

Marty dexterously stifled a yawn with a broad smile. "Oh, yes! Mr Etherington's a gem!" she declared, "and he's coming to see me on Sunday afternoon. I told him we were always at home. He asked if he might, and I thought I'd like to see him in my own house. All paste looks like real gems in a ballroom; it's the wear and tear of home life that tells whether they are gems or not." And then Marty

yawned again, such a yawn this time that not even her best smile could hide it.

Mrs Benyon stooped and turned out the fire. "I daresay it will be all right, Marty," she said. "Go and get to bed, my love. I am glad you have enjoyed yourself."

"I have had a lovely time," said Marty. "Good-night, darling! I'm sorry you dragged yourself out of bed to wait on me."

"Come, come," said Mrs Benyon, "it isn't much that I do to wait on you; it's generally the other way round. Good girls deserve good times now and again, and your mother isn't one that will ever grudge them to you."

So Marty went off to bed and slept far into the day, long after Mrs Benyon had got up and arrayed herself in her customary toilet of neat black, and was hard at work making up the minds of ladies who could not make them up for themselves, extolling the virtues of this and the beauties of the other, and, in short, making the wherewithal with which to provide the wants of her little brood.

At last Sunday afternoon arrived, and with it came the young man whom Marty had described to her mother as a gem. He was a pleasant-spoken young man of the ordinary public-school type, had an appointment in one of the Government offices, and was in all respects personable enough. Mrs Benyon had a certain inclination to address him as "sir," but she manfully choked it down and received him with a manner which was redolent both of graciousness and dignity. Amabel Leigh and one or two other girls came in during the course of the visit, and the afternoon was very merry indeed.

"I may come again, Mrs Benyon?" said Mr Etherington, as he took her hand at parting.

"Why, surely," she replied.

"My people are all out of London, you know," he went on, still holding her hand and looking at her with eager, almost anxious, eyes. "I know what it is to be dreadfully dull, dreadfully lonely, especially in the evenings."

"Perhaps you live a long way from this?" said Mrs Benyon.

"No, no, not ten minutes' walk away. If you would let me come in after dinner now and again, I —it would be such a—you don't know how kind it would be."

"Then come," said Mrs Benyon. "We don't go out very much in the evening, Marty and me. I sometimes go to a theatre and enjoy myself, but most evenings we are here sitting by ourselves."

"Thank you, so much," he said; "it is kind of you. I—don't know how to thank you enough."

And then as he finally took himself off, and the door was closed behind him, Amabel Leigh looked stonily at nothing. "A clean case of out on strike I should call it," she remarked presently, in a wooden kind of voice.

Marty giggled. It wasn't an irritating giggle, but a gay little bubble of laughter, a something which was there and had to come out, an ebullition that was as young and as full of good spirits as herself. "Some people know how to ask for what they want!" was her remark.

"And how to get it," rejoined Amabel.

And then the two giggled again as if no such joke had come in their way for many and many a day.

Mr George Etherington took Mrs Benyon at her word. It was wonderful how many excuses he was able to invent for knocking at the door of No. 28 Rosediamond Road. First it was that it would be polite to avail himself of the lady's kind permission to join their society; then it was a new song for Marty; then it was something in *Punch* that he thought Marty's mother would appreciate; then it was tickets for a concert, or a dance, or a theatre, or a few flowers, or the feeling of loneliness that he was sure they would help him to dispel—always something.

And so the short winter days developed into spring, and the long spring days went by, and the London season was in full swing. It is a time which affects everybody—those in the *beau monde* and those in humbler circumstances. Mrs Benyon was up to her eyes in fashions, and Marty was up to hers in engagements; and in all Marty's engagements there was one dominant note—George Etherington. He seemed to pervade the girl's whole life, was on the friendliest terms with the excellent Sarah, treated Mrs Benyon herself with an air which seemed to defy all fears of future relationship, squired Marty everywhere, and had not the faintest idea of the way in which the Rosediamond Road establishment was kept up.

"He is a dear boy," said Mrs Benyon one evening, when George Etherington had just left them, having escorted Marty back from a little evening party at the house of Amabel Leigh.

"Yes," said Marty, rather absently.

Mrs Benyon looked up. "You think so, don't you?" she asked a little anxiously.

"Oh, yes; I'm very fond of George. I—I—"

"What is it, Marty?" asked her mother.

"What is it?" said Marty, looking up with a ready smile beaming out again. "Nothing at all, darling, nothing at all. Do you remember the first time I ever saw George Etherington? It was at that ball in the Beatrice Rooms."

"No, I don't remember."

"Well, I wasn't sure then," said Marty, "and I'm not sure now, whether George is true-blue or he isn't."

"What makes you say that?"

"One or two little things."

"What sort of things?"

"You know," said Marty, "I went up to the Park yesterday, as I've done many a time before."

"Well?"

"To meet George and walk about, and look at all the fashions, and so on."

"Yes?"

"Well," said Marty, "I had that pink linen gown on —you know, with the green and black embroidery."

"Yes. And a lovely gown it is, too."

"And I had the burnt straw hat with the black velvet roses and the green leaves—you know, that goes with it."

"Yes."

"And a plain black parasol. I was looking all right."

"You always look all right," interposed Mrs Benyon somewhat fiercely.

"Yes, but sometimes I look all righter than others," said Marty, "and I was looking very much all right yesterday afternoon. And we met a lady, very stylish-looking, and she had a real stylish young

man with her too; and George went on, he didn't stop."

"Why should he stop? He can't stop to speak to everybody he knows when he's with a young lady; it wouldn't be manners," cried Mrs Benyon.

"It would have been manners in this case," said Marty, "because it was his own sister!"

CHAPTER IV

A NEW CLIENT

They say that small things rankle most in the feminine mind. I have not always found it so myself, but we will not argue the point. Certain it is that the fact that George Etherington had not stopped when he met his sister and her husband in the Park, but had passed her by as if she were but an ordinary acquaintance—and not an intimate one at that—did linger and did rankle in the mind of Marty Benyon. Marty was no fool. She knew, no one better, that if she had been the daughter of an R.A., or of anybody quite of the Etherington level in the social scale, her cavalier would have stopped and would have made her known to his sister. If I tell the exact truth—and, as you know, that is my usual habit in telling a story of this kind—I must confess that the quick, keen glance with which George Etherington's sister contrived in the moment of passing to take in every detail of Marty's person, rankled even more than the main incident itself. That very afternoon she had gone up to her own bedroom and had looked at herself in the long glass door of the wardrobe.

"Why did she look at me like that?" her angry thoughts ran. "It wasn't rude, it wasn't horrid, it

wasn't even unkind, and yet—she looked me up and down as if I had been a being out of another world. My things are all right—good, quiet, tasteful; they were good enough for a duchess before me, and yet— Oh-h-h! why is it? Why is it? It was the same way that Agnes O'Callaghan always looked over me at Folkestone. If ever I forgot myself, no matter how little, she would lift up her eyelids the eighth of an inch, and I used to feel mad. What is it? Where do they get it? George has got it too. George thinks he's going to marry me and be able to lift his eyelids at me, and say, 'My *dear* girl!'" And then she stood and looked at herself in the glass for quite a long time. "*Is* George going to marry me? *Does* George want to marry me? Is George true-blue, or is he only— Oh! I can't make up my mind."

And then she began slowly to unfasten the pretty frock, for Marty was a good girl, and never wore her outdoor garments in the house.

It was not until the next day that Marty so much as mentioned the incident to her mother. Mrs Benyon took rather a different view to Marty.

"My dear," she said, "you mustn't get fancying things. I don't see why it should be any more the thing to stop and introduce you to his sister than to introduce his sister to you. Some young men don't like their sisters to know young ladies that they are paying attention to."

"Perhaps that's it," said Marty; "perhaps it isn't. Time will show. However, we needn't talk about George, darling. There's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. He isn't the only young man in the world, all said and done!"

"You are so sensible, Marty," said Mrs Benyon, admiringly.

"It's a good thing I am," said Marty, in an airy tone. "Girls need all the sense they've got; most of them," she added, "haven't got any. Now if I were Amabel," she went on, and even the mother's quick ears did not notice how the gay young voice trembled, "if I were Amabel, I should send Charley Hurst to the right-about to-morrow—no, I wouldn't wait till to-morrow," she went on, bubbling over with laughing, "I'd do it to-night. Orders her about as if she were a slave—'Do this!' 'Don't do the other!' 'I don't approve of this, and I object to that!' I should like to read that young gentleman a lesson, that I should! By-the-bye, mother darling, where are we going for our holidays this year?"

"That," said Mrs Benyon, "is what I have never given a thought to. What would you like to do?"

"I should like to go somewhere where we could be a bit gay. I hate the ordinary seaside—shells on the beach in the morning; dawdling about with a bit of needlework in the afternoon; shuddering about in the damp sea air listening to a band at night."

"What else is there to do?" said Mrs Benyon.

"Well, you are going away for August?"

"Yes, as usual," her mother replied.

"And then Sarah gets a holiday in September. Of course, last September, darling, you had to do it by yourself, with just such help as Ann could give you, but this year, of course, I shall take Sarah's place."

"You will?" said Mrs Benyon.

"I'll do the best I can. I sha'n't be like Sarah, you know; still, I shall be better than no one."

"You are a good girl, Marty," said Mrs Benyon, looking at her daughter with a suspicious dewiness about her eyes.

Marty laughed outright. "Well, darling," she said, "I don't know where the goodness comes in. If ever a woman deserved a good daughter, that woman's you. You have set me an example long enough, goodness knows."

"Yes, but to go into the business," said Mrs Benyon.

"Fiddle-de-dee! What nonsense!" cried Marty. "What's good enough for you is good enough for me. I shall be a perfect fool at it, I have no doubt, but," she added, with her own gay little giggle of laughter, "we shall find out that when the time comes. Perhaps you'll turn me out neck and crop and refuse to let me in among your pretties!"

However, long before September came Marty lent her mother the promised hand upstairs, for about the middle of July the excellent Sarah fell ill; not seriously ill, but with a sharp attack of flu' which necessitated her keeping her bed and having a certain amount of personal attention.

"I insist on it, Marty," said Mrs Benyon, as soon as she knew the nature of Sarah's indisposition, "I insist on it that you don't go near Sarah's room."

"I must," said Marty.

"I forbid it!" said Mrs Benyon.

"Dear mother, how am I to go to bed?"

"Oh, I don't mean in that way! But Ann and

me can do everything that's necessary. It only means a few days in bed and living on slops."

"You are just as likely to get it as me, mother."

"No, I'm not; I'm hard. I never take anything—never did. You are like your poor father. It's the same disposition exactly."

Marty opened her eyes wide. "Me like father!" she exclaimed. "Well, that's the first time I ever heard of it. Mother, darling, what can you be thinking of?"

"Not to look at," said Mrs Benyon, "nor yet in your character."

"You said my disposition."

"I meant your constitution," said Mrs Benyon. "Your father always took everything, poor dear man. I used to say sometimes it was as if he prided himself on it. He ought to have been a professional burglar; I always told him so; but, poor dear man, he never turned anything to account, not even his natural disposition."

"Then," said Marty, "I shall come into the showroom."

"Law, my dear girl," said Mrs Benyon, "you don't know where anything is!"

"I can find out. I told you only the other day, when we were talking about it, that I shouldn't be like Sarah. I suppose Sarah knows where everything is as well as, or better than, you know yourself. But I can learn. Just come upstairs now with me, and walk round and show me exactly what there is to learn. I'm pretty quick. I shall pick it up in a morning."

And Marty did prove herself extraordinarily quick. She also showed that she would in time make a nice,

fresh, intelligent saleswoman, and more than one lady whispered to Mrs Benyon that she thought her new young lady was a very good find.

"Oh, your daughter is it?" said one, with an air of surprise. "Really! Then have you done away with Sarah?"

"Oh, dear no!" Mrs Benyon cried, in quite a shocked tone. "I couldn't do without Sarah, madam. She's quite my right-hand man—she knows more about the business than I do—but Sarah is not very well. Oh, nothing serious; she'll be about again in a day or two. Yes, we've had a very heavy season. There, we needn't grumble at that," she went on. "We should grumble a deal harder if we had no work to do!"

The lady laughed, and with a cheerful "Good morning" took herself away.

"A nice woman that, Marty," said Mrs Benyon; "no airs and graces about her. I know in a minute, child, when they come in here and they put on the big-pot, as if they weren't quite sure whether there was a bad smell or not, and they'd got into the place by mistake. There's nothing of that kind about Mrs Allington—a thoroughly nice woman. I'm always glad to let her have an extra bargain. Put away that rose *crêpe* dress, Marty," Mrs Benyon went on; "yes, I'd put it back into the calico slip. Nobody is likely to want it this afternoon."

But Mrs Benyon was wrong. Half-an-hour later a young lady arrived, pleasant of voice and manner, who was shown up by the available servant, and who told Mrs Benyon that she had need of a thoroughly smart ball-dress. Had she one?

"I have one," said Mrs Benyon, looking her over

with a professional eye, "that should just about fit you. It has never been worn. Deep mourning is the cause. It's a Doucet gown, and it cost forty-five guineas."

"Oh, that's much more than I wanted to give."

"Oh, yes, yes. I'm only telling you what her ladyship paid for it in the beginning," said Mrs Benyon.

"And it's price now?"

"The price now is thirteen guineas. You'll not get such a bargain in London. Marty! Marty!" she called. But no Marty answered. "Excuse me a minute, I'll get it for you. I thought my daughter was here," said Mrs Benyon; "she was a minute ago."

She spread out a great white linen sheet on which she displayed her most delicate goods, then going into the next room, she reappeared with the gown in its long calico slip held gingerly over one arm.

"There!" she said, as she cast aside the chrysalis and displayed the butterfly in all its glory, "there, madam! I don't know whether you know any of the other agencies of this kind in London, but this is the class of goods *we* are in the habit of selling."

The lady uttered a little cry. "Oh, it's lovely! Would it be possible to try it on?"

"Oh, certainly, madam. We shall be quite undisturbed, and being so near to lunch time, I doubt if any other customers will be coming; in any case, you will be quite private here."

The dress was quickly tried and decided on, and its price paid over.

"I'll send it home at once."

"No, indeed, you won't," said the lady. "I'll have a cab and take it. I don't live very far away."

"And your name—do you mind my knowing it? I

always like to know my ladies' names," said Mrs Benyon, in her pleasantest voice.

"Oh, I haven't the least objection to your knowing it. My name is Piers. I shall come again—often. I consider you a perfect find, Mrs Benyon."

So they parted. As she closed the door behind her new client, Mrs Benyon turned and went into the drawing-room. "Why are you there, Marty?" she exclaimed. "I've had such a nice young lady."

"You needn't tell me, mother," said Marty. "It's George's sister!"

CHAPTER V

A CRUMPLED ROSE-LEAF

"GEORGE'S sister!" repeated Mrs Benyon. "George Etherington's sister—the one you met in the Park?"

"Yes, the one I met in the Park," said Marty. The girl was looking straight out of the window. There was not a vestige of a smile on her face; her eyes were shaded by the brows drawn deeply over them; her mouth was set, almost grim.

"Was that why you kept out of sight, Marty?" said Mrs Benyon.

The girl roused herself, shook herself together as it were. "It was and it wasn't," she replied. "For a minute, as I saw her turn the head of the stairs, I had a sort of feeling that I must get out of the way and hide myself. I stayed away because I thought I might as well, and I didn't want to be introduced to her by anybody but George. But you like her?" she asked abruptly.

"Oh, yes, she's nice, pretty, good taste in dressing. She looked lovely in the pink *crêpe-de-chêne*. I'm sure Lady Marjorie herself never looked sweeter than she did."

"Oh, she tried it on?"

"Yes. Fitted her to a tee. She made me promise, if she came back one day next week, I would show her everything I have of Lady Marjorie's."

"You told her who they had come from?"

"No, I didn't do that. I said I had other dresses from the same lady; that she was a lady of title. I didn't give her name."

"I wouldn't if I were you," said Marty. "I—" She was silent for a moment, then a roguish little dimple appeared on one side of her mouth, and a smile gradually overspread her face, and she looked like herself again. "It's funny, when you come to think of it, mother. There's a wrong side of the carpet to everybody's affairs. To hear George talk sometimes you would think—oh, you'd think that his people were sacred beings! Oh, mother, a business like yours does let you in behind the scenes, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps," said Mrs Benyon, shrewdly, as she led the way into the dining-room, where the very light lunch in which she indulged was spread upon the table, "perhaps that will come in useful in more ways than one to you, Marty. Have a sandwich?"

Marty drew her chair up to the table. "Yes, mother, thank you. Yes, I think you are right. Oh, mother, mother, this is a funny, shallow little world, and the longer I live in it the more funny and the more shallow I find it."

"I often think," said Mrs Benyon, biting reflectively into a sandwich, "when I read in the papers about deep things, deep tragedies, deep thoughts, I often think to myself that, after all, it's only a way of putting it. We are all a lot of mites digging about on the outside of the world; we never get lower down than the very outside of the crust. And it's very much the same with feelings and thoughts; they seem deep at the time, some of them, but when you look

back after it's all over and done with, you generally feel that you made a great fuss about nothing—What did you say, cook? A young lady must see me—very important? Oh, dear, dear! Well, tell her I'll be up in five minutes."

During the rest of the day she several times glanced very keenly and scrutinisingly at Marty, but Marty was just her usual self. She helped her mother during the afternoon, shared her tea, went out a little later, and, in the evening, was seated at the piano playing a new waltz when George Etherington was announced.

He was in evening dress, and explained that he had to go to a party later on.

"What sort of a party?" asked Marty.

"It's really a dance, given at the house of some great friends of my sister." His voice seemed always to take on a slightly more formal tone when he spoke of any of his own people.

"Seen your sister to-day?" said Marty, in a very off-hand kind of way.

"Yes, I dined there."

"Ah! She lives in Cottenham Avenue, doesn't she?"

Etherington looked up, surprised. "Er—er—yes. Who told you?"

"Who told me?" said Marty, reflectively. "Well, upon my word I don't know if I can tell you. It isn't a matter of great importance, I suppose? There's no secret about it?"

"Oh, not the least in the world. I only wondered, that was all. Will you come out with me to-morrow?"

"Where?"

"Anywhere you like. I could get seats at *The Importance of Being Drivelling.* You haven't seen it, have you?"

"No, I haven't seen it," said Marty. "I'd like to go."

"It begins at nine. I'll come round here at half-past eight."

"Yes, do," said Marty, with quiet coolness. "I'm sorry we can't ask you to have dinner with us before, but Sarah's got the influenza. She's in bed."

"Sarah? Ah, I thought I missed her. I thought perhaps she had left."

"Oh, no, Sarah never leaves," said Marty; "only when she has to go to bed with the flu', or away on a holiday, which isn't often, poor dear. And then you can tell me all about the ball," she went on, speaking in a sprightly and gracious manner. "Be sure you notice what sort of a dress your sister wears. She's very pretty."

"Oh, I can tell you what sort of a dress she'll wear," said George. "She had to go out and get one somewhere or other this morning, because the dress she was going to wear got dreadfully torn last night."

"Oh, really! You don't say so! Poor thing!"

"And so she told her husband this morning that she would have to go out and get one by hook or crook, and I don't know where she went for it, but she landed back with a ripping ball-gown."

"Perhaps she went to Peter's," said Marty.

"I don't think so. I don't think she fancies Peter's. She used to go to a woman called Emmeline Schlesinger, but I fancy she has given her up for some reason or other. However, I'll take note of it to-night and tell you to-morrow what it is like."

"Where is this dance?" said Marty.

"It's at an artist's up in the Melbury Road."

Their conversation was scrappy and had a continual hitch in it, like a person with very thin shoes who treads on unexpected pebbles, and brings up the fine swinging walk with an unaccustomed halt. For months these two had been used to talk without knowing they were talking; now, all at once, their intercourse became laboured, even stilted. She knew the reason; he did not, and he was impatient accordingly.

"What were you playing when I came in?" he asked.

"Oh, that waltz we heard the other night, the one you liked so much."

"Yes, I said I'd send it to you."

"But you didn't."

"No more I did. And you got it?"

"I did."

"Oh, Marty, you shouldn't!"

"Well, I thought you had forgotten it. It didn't matter. I've got a new song, too."

"Sing it to me, do!"

The girl turned to the piano and began to play and then to sing, partly because singing was easier than talking. It was a pretty, dainty, telling little song, and scraps of it remained in George Etherington's memory for many and many a day,—

> "I tell each bead unto the end,
> And there a cross is hung."

He shivered, and moved uneasily, but Marty's sweet, fresh voice went on, for she neither saw the

shiver nor the quick, outward motion of the foot, which seemed as though he would push all unpleasant subjects away from him,—

"O memories that bless and burn!
O barren gain and bitter loss!
I kiss each bead, and strive at last to learn
To kiss the cross, sweetheart, to kiss the cross!"

As the last deep note died away, George Etherington got up from his chair and flung to the window.

"I don't like it," he said.

Marty twisted half round on the music-stool. "Oh, don't you? Well, I can't help that. It's a lovely song. What is there you don't like about it?"

She had twisted quite round now and sat looking at him, her hands loosely clasped in her lap, her eyes lighted up with her wonted smile. She was miserable, this girl; she was going through her first spell of disillusionment, yet, all the same, the sight of George Etherington unmistakably on the grill, unmistakably uncomfortable, disturbed, ill at ease, was quite sufficient to call forth all her old power of seeing the humorous side of every situation.

"Oh, I don't like it. It's gloomy, and sad, and yowling"

"No, it's not yowling," said Marty. "It's sad, I admit; it's hardly gloomy, but it isn't yowling. George," she said, suddenly speaking in a totally different voice, "George, there's something wrong with you to-night. You are ill at ease and uncomfortable. You are not exactly in a bad temper, but you would be for half a word. What is it? Have I done anything to vex you?"

"You? No. How should you? Why should you?"

"Well, I don't know why, or yet how, but something must have happened to put your lordship about. I'd like to know what it is."

"Nothing — nothing. I don't think I'm very well."

"Oh, you are not very well? You are going to a ball and you're not happy? You're like the Princess that had the crumpled rose-leaf in her bed. What's your crumpled rose-leaf?"

"It's *you*," said George, turning almost savagely upon her.

"Me!" Marty looked the very picture of surprised innocence. "And pray what have I been doing?"

"I don't know what you have been doing," said George Etherington, sitting down on the arm of a big chair and looking savagely at the toe of his shining slipper. "I don't know what you have been doing, but you have been doing something."

"I have. I went out this afternoon, and I've eaten my dinner, and that's about all I've done to-day."

"I didn't say it was to-day," he burst out. "You are different."

"Do you think I am?" She said the words in such a tone, they conveyed at once an invitation, a regret, a wistfulness, and an entreaty. "Do you think I am?" she repeated.

George Etherington sat forward a little and rested his chin upon his hand, his elbow upon his knee. "Yes," he said, nibbling the end of his little finger between his teeth, "yes, something's happened to you. I believe it's another fellow. You don't look at me the same, you don't speak the same, your handshake

is different, *you* are different. You—you—you have been hatching something."

"Hatching something! I? Another fellow! And if there were, I'm not engaged to you. You have no right to demand or to expect that I sha'n't speak to 'another fellow' as you call him. I'm perfectly free to do as I like, just as you are perfectly free to go to this ball to-night."

"It isn't quite the same—" he began, but Marty caught him up.

"No, George, it isn't quite the same," she said, dropping her words out one by one. "We don't stand on the same platform, you and I. I tell you everything, show you everything, I've been a real chum to you; you have only made me a little bit of your life, I've made you welcome as a friend to the whole of mine. Don't talk silly nonsense about other fellows. You don't understand how to live, my dear boy; you don't understand the right way to look at life at all. Other fellows!—hatching things! You're not going to ask me to marry you, George, so what have you to do with other fellows?"

"And if I did?"

"If you did? Well, if you did, I should tell you that you are just the last man in the world that I would think of spending the rest of my life with. You are a nice boy—you are a dear boy; you have been very kind to me, and I'm quite fond of you, but when you come to serious questions like marrying, 'other fellows,' 'hatching things,' and all the rest of it, my dear boy you are—you are preposterous!"

CHAPTER VI

THE UNPALATABLE TRUTH

When Marty had come to the end of her tirade against George Etherington's pretensions, that young gentleman's countenance was pitiful to behold. To say that he was astonished is to express but little of the feeling which had taken possession of him. That Marty, whom he had honoured with his attentions, should thus turn upon him, and, metaphorically speaking, "rend him," was as unlooked-for as it was unpalatable, and Marty's voice and manner left no doubt but that she was thoroughly in earnest. She gave him no time to reply, but whisked back to the piano again and began playing the dreamy waltz which had been the first that ever she danced with him. It was a waltz which just then had taken possession of London. Every boy in the street whistled it, every piano-organ droned it, every school-girl played it, and it was to be found in every dance programme. It had a slow, dreamy, swinging movement, as if the composer had written it with his eyes shut, as if the player must needs shut out the world in the same way, the better to enjoy it.

George Etherington looked at Marty. She was apparently thinking of nothing but the sweet sounds stealing from under her little, firm, capable hands,—

La-la-la!—La-la-la!—La-la-la—a!

"Marty!" said George Etherington, quite sternly.

"H'm!" returned Marty, continuing to play,—

La-la-la!—La-la-la!—La-la-la—a!

"I want to speak to you, Marty."

"Go on," said Marty,—

La-la-la!—La-la-la!—La-la-la—a!

"Is that your last word, Marty?"

"I think it's my first so far as you are concerned, George," she said, speaking very sharply through the strains of the seductive waltz.

"I asked if it was your *last* word, Marty?" he said.

"Yes," said Marty over her shoulder, "it's my last word."

"All right. That's all I wanted to know," he said, in a very don't-care sort of voice. "It's just as well —er—to have a clear understanding, to know where we are, so to speak."

"Oh, quite!" said Marty,—

Tra-la-la!—Tra-la-la!

"Then, good-night," said George.

"Good-night," said Marty. "I hope you'll enjoy your dance."

"You may rest assured I shall not do that," said George, at the door.

"Be sure to tell me to-morrow what your sister wore," Marty called after him.

"Oh, I'll remember," said George.

And then he shut the door very quietly, and Marty played resolutely on, played right to the end of the waltz, played as if she loved every note; and all the time her heart was going down lower and lower, and a chill seemed to be stealing up from somewhere and wrapping her round as if with some great misty blanket.

It was just then that Mrs Benyon came into the room. "What, has Mr Etherington gone?" she asked.

"Gone to a dance," said Marty, beginning to play the waltz again.

"Gone to a dance! And didn't take you?"

"It's a private dance," said Marty.

Some catch in the young voice caused the mother to look keenly at the girl, and to her dismay she saw that while she played the tears were dropping down upon her hands. Some mothers would have gone away; Mrs Benyon never thought of it; on the contrary, she moved close up to the piano and laid her hand on the girl's shoulder.

"What's happened, my honey-bird?" she inquired. It was years since she had addressed Marty by the homely and tender appellation.

Marty played on as if she had not heard her; the tears also continued to fall. Then some touch of the mother's hand made her stop with a jerk and shake the tears off her face.

"It's nothing at all, mother. Don't worry yourself about it. We've—we've had a little explanation to-night, George and me, and I—I've put him back in his place. It doesn't matter. Don't you fret. I'm not really crying. How is Sarah to-night? Can't I do anything to help you?" She dived into her pocket, and bringing out a diminutive handkerchief, dried her eyes with a firm and energetic hand. "It isn't often you see me giving way to the femininities, mother. There, darling," catching hold of her hand, "don't upset your dear self. It's all right."

"Marty," said Mrs Benyon, in a trembling voice, "is he true blue, dear, or isn't he?"

"I mostly think he isn't," said Marty, "and it comes with a bit of a pang when you once fancied he was blue right through, like a sapphire. Never mind. How is Sarah?"

"She's better to-night, my honey—no fever, and the pain in her head quite gone. I'm going to leave my door open, and Ann's going to sleep in the little room, and she'll leave hers ajar, so one of us will hear her if she wants anything."

"Then," said Marty, "if I can't do anything to help you I may as well go to bed."

She shut the piano, put the music tidy on the stand, and with a hurried kiss to her mother she went out of the room and up the stairs. Mrs Benyon stood looking after her with a very grave face.

"I suppose it's always got to come," she muttered to herself, "into every girl's life. It seems hard it should have come to her so soon, but perhaps the earlier they take it the better they get over it. I had my doubts it was too good to last. What is it, I wonder?"

Mrs Benyon, however, being a sensible woman, came to the very sensible conclusion that standing there cogitating would not bring her to any elucidation of the mystery, so she went upstairs to bed, and, being very tired, she soon slept the sleep of the just. And Marty? I might tell you how she lay through the long watches of the night sobbing as if her heart would break; but I am a true chronicler, if nothing else, and I must confess that Marty did nothing of the kind. When she reached the sanctity of her own bedroom she shut the door, and, turning on the light, walked resolutely to the dressing-table. "Marty Benyon," she said to her other self in the

glass, "what possessed you to be such a fool, to whine and cry and worry your mother? No more of it, Marty Benyon, now. Remember that above all things you have plenty of pride, and if George Etheringtons like to go away, George Etheringtons can please themselves. If there aren't other Georges in the sea as good as those that have come out of it, well, there may be Geoffreys and Henrys and Williams and Johns. I'm ashamed of you, Marty Benyon!" And then she picked up a bottle of simple face wash—rose-water or something of that kind—and, shaking it as if she would shake herself at the same time, she fiercely dabbed her face, and then like a whirlwind disrobed and got into bed.

She was curious to see what morning light would do, and her first thought on waking was to wonder if there was a letter for her. Now Ann, the good lady who presided over the culinary department of 28 Rosediamond Road, had established the order of early morning tea. Mrs Benyon had never thought of it; Marty had never thought of it; but Ann was a person who loved comfort, and as she always made herself a cup of tea by the aid of the gas ring in her kitchen, as soon as she descended from her sleeping apartment, she was in the habit of carrying a cup upstairs to her mistress and to "Miss Marty."

"Wake up, Miss Marty," she said, on the morning following the explanation with George Etherington, "wake up, Miss Marty, here's your tea. Do you feel all right, my dear?"

"Oh, yes, thank you, Ann," said Marty. "How is Sarah?"

"Much better this morning. Ramping about trying to get up."

"You won't let her?" cried Marty, anxiously.

"I told her I'd give her a good thumping if she tried on anything of the kind, so she's ramping about in her bed," Ann replied, "and fussing and fuming as if the business and everything else would go to wreck and ruin because she doesn't happen to be at the head and front of affairs. 'Three days, Sarah Hummanby,' I said to her, 'three days lying still, taking all the slop nourishment we can get into you, and then we'll talk about getting up.' Personally, I don't believe in relapses in intrurenza!"

"No, nor I. You are quite right, Ann. You're a brick and a good sort. I do hope you won't get it," said Marty.

"Not me! Sarah's got a bit run down—she's been doing too much. She isn't so young as she was, though she doesn't like anybody to tell her. But you keep out of her room now, Miss Marty. There's no call for you to go messing about persuading her to be good. She'll be all right by-and-by."

"Are there any letters, Ann?" asked Marty.

"Not a letter—well, three business letters for the missis, but I took them to her with her tea."

And then the good woman shut the door and Marty was left alone. She wondered what George would do. Well, wondering wouldn't help matters, so she got up and dressed. She was always an early riser, and she did many a little odd and end in the house that nobody had ever asked her to do, and by the time she got down to breakfast she was the same gay and bewitching Marty who had first fascinated the unhappy George.

One glance at her daughter's face was sufficient to reassure Mrs Benyon that no particular harm had

been done by the *contretemps* of the previous evening. She fussed about a little after her, showed her her letters—all three of them from ladies' maids in high quarters, who were sending her consignments of butterflies' skins—and mentioned one or two business letters which she wanted Marty to write for her.

It was a very busy day, and Mrs Benyon was thankful to have Marty's brisk, bright help. Lunch, that frugal meal which they snatched as they could, came and went, and there was no word from George Etherington; indeed, it was not until after four o'clock, when work for the day was over, that Marty received a telegram. It simply said, "Do you expect me this evening?" and the reply was prepaid.

"The boy's waiting, Miss Marty," said Ann; and Mrs Benyon looked up inquiringly.

Marty caught up a pencil which was lying on the table and quickly wrote her reply on the form which was enclosed: "Just as you feel inclined," was the message she wrote.

"What is it, love?" said Mrs Benyon, as the door closed behind Ann.

"Only a wire from George, mother. He wasn't sure whether I expected him this evening or not."

"And do you?" the mother asked.

"I do, and I don't. I told him he could come if he liked."

"I see. What are you going to do this afternoon, dear?"

"Well, I promised to go out with Amabel, if you don't want me. I've written those letters for you, darling."

"Oh, no, I don't want you," said Mrs Benyon.

"You are quite sure, darling, there's nothing else I can do for you? Or would you like me to go out with you?"

"No, I don't feel like going out this afternoon. I think I'll keep myself quiet, and then after dinner perhaps I'll get on the top of the 'bus and go as far as it stops at, and come back without getting down. I shall get a blow of fresh air that way."

In less than a quarter of an hour Marty had left the house and was on her way to that of her friend. She had not been gone more than half-an-hour when a second telegraph boy came knocking at the door. The message this time contained no prepaid reply; it just said, "Seats for theatre with you eight o'clock."

CHAPTER VII

TRUE BLUE

When George Etherington went out of Marty's presence, I may as well confess that he flung out of the house with the intention of never entering it again. He was in a towering passion, brimming over with astonishment, and feeling very much as one might do if a pet canary bird had suddenly become dangerous to life. How shall I describe his exact feeling with regard to Marty? He did not know that he was quite in love with her. He had been immensely attracted in the first instance by her frank gaiety of disposition, her winningness of manner, her downright way of saying exactly what she thought, and by her very elegant appearance; and, as he had come to know the girl better, the first impression had been deepened rather than otherwise. But he was under no illusion regarding the class of life in which Marty had been born and brought up. His first introduction to Mrs Benyon had told him, almost to a nicety, what she was—I mean from what grade of Society she had come. He thought that Marty's father must have been of a better position, but one day Mrs Benyon, when he found her alone, had pointed out to him a photograph of "my poor dear husband," and ever since Etherington had always thought of Marty as being somewhat of a freak of Nature.

Truth to tell, he had turned over in his own mind, many and many a time, the fors and against that such a marriage presented. He had thought out a series of little scenes: the first meeting of Marty with his sister, Mrs Piers; the first meeting of Marty with his stately mother, who was related—distantly it is true, but still related—to half a dozen blue-blooded families; the effect of Marty and her refreshing downrightness upon his dignified father. He had wondered over and over again what the boys would say, and sharp little Margot, not yet out of the schoolroom. Nor did it all end there, these conjectures and dreams. If he was doubtful about Marty, what about Marty's mother? What would be the effect of Marty's mother upon his mother? What would his father say when he had to give an arm to Mrs Benyon when escorting her to dinner? And I must confess that to every one of these questions the answer was always an answer of objection in some form or other.

And so he had drifted on from week to week and from month to month, putting the matter on one side, as men do when they are in an awkward dilemma, and only feeling more and more that Marty was a dear little thing, the best little girl in the world, and that life would be very blank if there was no more Marty in it. And then to have Marty suddenly turn round, like some baby-lamb upon a great well-bred collie! Turning? nay, she had thoroughly rounded on him. She had looked him through with her blue eyes, and her lips with never a smile on them, and had let fall words that burned where they touched. He was a "good chum"; she was "quite fond of him"—in a way; but "when he

came to talk of serious questions, he was preposterous!"

Well, as he swung round the corner of the street in which his sister lived, he felt that, after all, it was just as well. He would have found it awfully hard to break off with Marty; it would have cut a big slice out of his life—ay, and the slice that had all the plums in it—and it would have taken more nerve than he knew he possessed if he had deliberately cut himself off from Marty. But Marty herself had done it. Marty had brought everything to a head. She had spoken in no passion; she had simply happened to come to that point of their friendship in which it pleased her to say exactly what was in her mind. Marty had ended it all. Perhaps it was as well.

A brougham was standing at the door of his sister's house, and just as George gained the doorstep, his brother-in-law came out.

"Oh, you are there, old chap? I was just coming out to look for you," he said heartily. "Effie is ready, waiting; and she's got such a gown on!"

"Oh, has she?" said George, rather lamely. "Is she on show? Shall I go in?"

"Yes, do. She's in the dining-room."

He turned into the dining-room, where Mrs Piers, a vision of rose-coloured loveliness, was standing near the table. "How do you like my gown, George?" she asked.

"My dear, you are a dream of beauty! Is that the same place as the last? Surely not."

"The last? Oh, no; it's a Doucet gown," said Mrs Piers, with a little conscious laugh, stealing a glance at herself in the glass behind the sideboard.

"Doucet? I thought he was beyond all chance of

moderate people dealing with," said George, eyeing the beautiful gown with an interest which he tried hard to make very real.

"Oh, I know a little woman who can get these things reasonably," said Mrs Piers, rather mysteriously. "However, we won't stay to discuss my frock to-night. It evidently pleases your lordship. Dick said the carriage was at the door, so let us go."

It was one of Mrs Piers's little luxuries that whenever she had a good evening gown on she should have a carriage from the nearest livery stable, and they all got into it and were driven off to the scene of festivity. There was no festivity in George Etherington's heart. He was an excellent dancer, and he loved dancing for its own sake, but he loved nothing that night, not even himself.

He filled his programme as a matter of habit, and he danced as a matter of habit, likewise, but he had no flow of amusing small talk with which to entertain his various partners; he felt none of the languorous enjoyment which dancing usually brings. He was correct, cold, abstracted; and one or two girls told him plainly that they didn't know what had come over him.

At last he went home. To sleep? No, to toss and turn and feel that life was all ended, and that the best part of it had been torn away from him. He felt convinced, too, that there was some other fellow, and that Marty had some definite reason for having changed as she had done. After four hours of this torment he got up and came down to breakfast, looking like a man who had not slept for a week.

"Why, George," said his mother, "have you got a headache?"

"Yes, mother."

"Late hours don't suit you, my dear."

"Oh, I don't think it's the late hours. I don't feel very bright."

"Nice dance?" asked Mrs Etherington.

"Yes—I suppose it was. Effie seemed to have a good time."

"She had a beautiful dress," said her mother.

"Yes, it was a nice dress, and everybody seemed to think she looked very nice in it. Not any bacon, thank you."

"My dear boy, do try to eat if you feel out of sorts. There's nothing like a good breakfast; it lays the foundation of a good day. This bacon is beautiful."

"I know it. It looks delicious."

"It *is* delicious," said Colonel Etherington from his end of the table. George's father was an old gentleman who had come to realise that food may be the most important factor in human happiness or misery. George, however, declined the bacon, but yielded to his mother's suggestion that anchovy on toast was the next best thing.

At last he got himself away, and presently went up the street looking very smart in his grey Park clothes and his tall and glossy hat. But if he was smooth and attractive outside, everything was as a turbulent torrent within. Never in his life had he found his work as uninteresting and meaningless and irksome as it was that morning. More than once he caught himself wishing wildly that he were a circus man going round with a travelling show. That life, at least, would not be the utter stagnation of life in a Government office. There would always be the anxiety as to whether the show would fail, always an

element of chance and uncertainty. He felt in the dull and decorous atmosphere that day as if it would be a positive relief to have to mount a platform and beat a big drum, crying, "Walk up, Ladies and Gentlemen! Walk up! The performance is about to begin!" Then he realised with a pang that dainty Marty, as he always thought of her, even if her mother was a homely, unassuming kind of person, would certainly never lower herself to look at a circus man, that the beating of the big drum would have no charms for her.

Then he went out to lunch, feeling as if his brain were going, and his head becoming no better than a mashed turnip. Lunch mitigated his misery for a time, but the decorous atmosphere of the office soon brought all his wretchedness back again, and then it was that he sent a telegram to Marty with the result that I have already shown. He determined then that he would beat about the bush no longer, but he would take a suitable opportunity and ask Marty to marry him, leaving all the outside considerations to arrange themselves later on.

But it's one thing to make up one's mind to follow a certain course, and it's quite another thing to carry such a resolution into effect. When George Etherington arrived at Rosediamond Road he found Marty in a very smart little frock sitting at the piano. For once in his life he felt awkward and almost like a schoolboy.

"I'm so awfully glad you can come," he remarked.

"I told you yesterday I could come," said Marty, giving him her hand and letting it slip away as if there was no attraction to her in the contact.

"I wasn't sure," stammered he.

"Oh, I see," said Marty. "Well, shall we be going? What time does the thing begin?"

"We've plenty of time," he said; "besides, I've got a cab outside."

"Oh, that's all right! Will you have anything before you go?"

No, he would take nothing, and he stood fidgeting about whilst Marty put on her gloves and then slipped on her long cashmere coat.

"We may as well be going then, don't you think?" he remarked in his stiffest tones.

"Yes," said Marty, "we may as well be going. Only there's one thing I want to say before we do go."

"And that is?" he began, assuming an attitude of polite attention.

"Well, it's just this, George," said Marty. "If you are going to behave for a whole evening as if you had swallowed a poker, and as if you had got a paralytic stroke in your tongue, and you weren't sure if I was going to hit you or not, I'd rather not go."

She looked so roguish, there was such a bewitching dimple somewhere near her mouth, which was only the beginning of a series which gradually bloomed out all over her face, that all George's misery and starchiness quickly deserted him.

"Marty," he said, catching hold of her hands and drawing them up against his breast, "I swear to you that there hasn't been a more miserable devil in the three kingdoms than I the last twenty-four hours."

"So?" said Marty.

"Marty," said he, "haven't you been a little miserable too?"

Marty bit her lip, and some of the dimples dis-

appeared. "Perhaps I have," she said, trying to pull her hands away, and finding something very engrossing to look at in the corner of the room. "Ye-s, perhaps I have."

"What did you want to do it for, Marty?" he demanded earnestly.

"It wasn't I that did it," said Marty.

"Wasn't it? Was it—do you mean that anything I did?—Oh, it's too utterly silly for words! I—I—Marty, you must know that I worship the very ground you walk on!"

CHAPTER VIII

A PLEDGE

I TAKE it that a good deal of the romance of life is acted with the interior of a cab for a background. When George Etherington and Marty had kissed and then came back to their senses, it was the girl who remembered that a patient Jervey was waiting outside, and that his patience would have to be paid for.

"It's a bore and a nuisance having to go to a theatre," said he, "but we may as well, perhaps."

"Oh, yes, I'm dressed, and the drive will be nice, and I don't want to talk too much just now. I—I'd like to go if you don't mind, George."

So they went. George had never put Marty into a cab with such solicitude, and Marty had never sat quite so close to him as she did that night, and he did what he had never done before in all their chumminess and friendly intercourse—he held her hand closely in his and told himself and her that he was the happiest man that the whole world contained that night.

"You know, darling," he said, "you ought to have done better."

"Do you think your people will agree with you?" she asked suddenly.

"My people?" For the life of him he couldn't

keep back the shadow from falling over his face. "My people?"

"Yes."

"Well, of course they've got to be reckoned with, but I'm not in any way dependent on my people, Marty. I've never cost my father a penny since I left Oxford, and I sha'n't look to them to provide me with the wherewithal now."

"No?" said Marty, half-questioningly.

"You see, I've seven hundred a year. I went to Oxford young, so I started in the Service in good time. That and a certain amount of family influence have pushed me on, and consequently I'm as comfortably off as I have ever wanted to be."

"I call seven hundred a year a very good income," said Marty.

"Yes, it's a good income; at the same time there'll be nothing to play with. I shall have more later on —at least, I imagine so, and—oh, we shall manage to do all right. All the same, Marty, I'm no sort of a match for you."

"Well, if that's so, what am I?" said Marty.

"You are the dearest little girl in the world."

"I know; but we can't live on that, can we? My being a dear little girl won't provide bread and cheese, and so on. And then I don't know that your people—"

"Oh, don't talk about my people."

"I must," said Marty, looking straight out over the horse's ears as they sped along by the Park railings. "It will be an awful drop-down for your father and mother when they realise that you want to marry me."

"My dear, they don't know anything about you.

I know that they are not prejudiced sort of people."

"Perhaps not. I'm afraid they won't like me, George."

"Well, if they don't you know what the Scripture says: 'A man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife, and they twain shall be one flesh.'"

There was something suspiciously like a twinkle of tears glistening in Marty's bright eyes. "Do you really feel like that for me?" she cried. "George, I —I have had doubts about you these last few days, whether you were true blue or you were not, but if you feel like that for me, I'll stick to you, George, I'll stick to you as long as there's life in me!"

And then they fell to talking of less disagreeable subjects—of themselves, of their love for each other, of the sweet little flat they would have later on, and how, when George was away earning money, Marty would be doing her share at home in making both ends meet, with a little something to lap over. And then they went to the play, and sat through such a tragedy of love that their own little threads of misunderstanding seemed too insignificant ever to think of again.

Marty resisted his suggestion that they should have a bit of supper before they went home. "No, not to-night," she said. "Mother wasn't very well; she seemed tired and listless, and she will be looking for me. I'd rather not stay out later than need be to-night."

So they had a long, delicious drive home through the soft summer night—a drive when Marty sat still a little nearer than she had done before, when George's

arm unconsciously stole round her waist, and her head found a resting-place on his stalwart shoulder. There were many kisses, too, and many words of love; and if the driver of the cab had happened to be a person of an inquisitive disposition, he would have had much food for reflection had he taken a peep through his roof-trap at the happy pair below.

As they turned the corner into Rosediamond Road, Marty sat up and shook herself together. "You are going to tell your mother?" she said.

"Of course."

"To-night?"

"Yes, if she's visible."

She gave a long-drawn breath of contentment. So George was true blue after all. I think she loved him the more that she had doubted him.

They found Mrs Benyon sitting in a big chair in the pretty little drawing-room. There was a tall lamp with a pink shade at her elbow, and the light so fell upon her that George Etherington was struck with the sweetness of her expression as she looked up on their entrance.

"Oh, there you are, my dear!" she exclaimed. "I was so deep in my book that I didn't hear the cab stop—at least, I wasn't quite sure. Well, was the piece nice? Did you enjoy yourselves?"

"Very much indeed," said George, taking her hand in his own peculiarly protecting manner.

"There's a bit of supper laid in the dining-room," said Mrs Benyon, hospitably. "I always like just a little snack when I come in from a theatre. Turn up the light, Marty, dear, will you?"

So Marty went out, and Mrs Benyon put her book down and got up slowly out of the big chair.

"Mrs Benyon," said George, putting out his hand to her.

"What is it?" she asked. "Something has happened. It isn't—?"

"Yes, it is," he replied. "Marty and I have come to an understanding to-night. We are engaged, Mrs Benyon."

"Engaged! You and Marty?"

"Yes, we're engaged. I hope you don't mind. You have known me a long time; you must have seen which way things were tending."

"I wasn't grumbling," said Marty's mother, in rather a tremulous voice, "I wasn't grumbling, Mr Etherington. I was a little taken aback. Have you told your father and mother?"

"No, I thought you had the first right."

"There's no first about it. They are as much your father and mother as I am Marty's. They might raise an objection."

"They might. I don't think they will—possibly they may. It will be the same in the end," said he.

"How do you mean?"

"I'm going to marry Marty all the same."

"You have quite set your mind on it?"

"Yes, we've quite set our minds and, what is a good deal more important, our hearts upon it. I am not a rich man, Mrs Benyon, but there's enough for Marty to begin on—or at least she thinks so—and I hope to be better off by-and-by. You see, I'm young, and every year tells in a Government office, but I hope, Mrs Benyon, you'll give us your blessing and let the future take care of itself."

"Give you my blessing!" cried Mrs Benyon, almost hysterically. "Yes, that I will—fifty thousand of

them, and fifty thousand more to put to that again. I wish I could give you more than mere blessings, Mr Etherington; yes, I wish I had a nice little fortune to hand over with Marty, but there isn't a penny. I was left with three little girls on my hands —Oh, I can't go into all that; it's too much! I'll tell you everything some day, just how we are situated, just how I managed, but not to-night."

At that moment Marty came running back again. "My goodness!" she exclaimed. "Mother on the verge of tears, and George looking as if he had—oh, what's the matter?"

Mrs Benyon flung out a convulsive hand. "My darling!" she said, "my Marty!"

"There, if you're going to cry about it I'll send George packing straight. Whatever happens, I can't have you upset."

"Come, my dears," said her mother, "come, darlings, come in to supper."

"You must drink our health, mother, dear. You mustn't be downhearted and sorry, or I shall wish I had never said 'Yes' when George asked me!"

"Don't say that, my love," cried Mrs Benyon, earnestly, for she knew, poor woman, how deeply the girl's heart was involved. "Don't say that, my darling. Not but what you are quite right, quite right. It never does to look at the wrong side and shed tears where there is no necessity. Come and have some supper, my dears. I think, Marty," she went on, bravely choking down her natural emotion as she crossed the little entrance hall, "I think, Marty, that there was a bottle of champagne left over from my birthday dinner—"

"I know. I'll get it," said Marty.

"She would have a birthday dinner," Mrs Benyon explained to George, "she would have it, reason or none, to celebrate the first birthday after her coming home from school. I knew what the dear child meant, and so we had a couple of bottles of champagne in. We only had an old friend of mine—who was very kind to me in days gone by—to dine with us, and one bottle was as much as we three could manage between us, so the second bottle never was touched and there it's been for seven months lying on its side, waiting to be opened. Ah, here she is! Now, let Mr Etherington open it, dear."

What a supper it was! There was a part of a cold tongue, and a part of a boiled chicken, a little piece of cheese in a glass dish with a cover, a few sardines, and some bread and butter. It was a supper for the gods! George Etherington admitted that he had not eaten much that day, and that he was ravenously hungry, and he certainly proved himself as good as his words.

"And now," said Mrs Benyon, when she had given him a good helping of chicken and tongue to follow the sardines, "and now let us have glasses full to the top to drink to your health and happiness. I can't give my girl a fortune, Mr Etherington—"

"Couldn't you call me 'George'?" he put in. "We may as well begin as we mean to go on."

"I should like to call you 'George,'" she said, half shyly, "and thank you very much for saying it."

"Don't spoil him, mother," put in Marty. "I think George is a character that might be spoiled with too much kindness. You have never had a boy of your own, you know, darling. Don't you get buttering George up until he doesn't know where he is, and

fancies himself too good for everything, for if you do I shall have to bear the brunt of it."

"Don't you believe her, Mrs Benyon, don't you believe her. You can't spoil a good thing. I should have been spoiled long ago if I was capable of it." Then he lifted his glass. "Mrs Benyon," he said, "to pledge you my word and my honour that I will be everything you wish me to be for Marty!"

CHAPTER IX

A BOMBSHELL

At last George Etherington got away from the little house in Rosediamond Road. He certainly had begun as he meant to go on. He kissed Marty openly before her mother, with "I shall see you to-morrow, my darling!" and then he went and took hold of Mrs Benyon's two hands. "Good-night, Mater," he said, "till to-morrow." And then he bent and kissed her likewise.

"I declare," said Mrs Benyon, as she shut the door and put on the chain, "I declare, Marty, you could have knocked me down with a feather to hear that grand young gentleman calling me 'Mater,' and then for him to just kiss me as if I had been his own mother."

"Well, you are next door to his own mother," said Marty. She was by no means overcome by George's condescension. "For mercy's sake, mother, darling, don't let George think that you look upon it as something wonderful he should kiss you now and again. There'll be no holding him back if you do."

"You will have your joke," said Mrs Benyon, fondly.

Meantime George Etherington was striding away up the street. In the face of Mrs Benyon's yawns

he had had no choice but to say good-night and take his departure. He neither felt like going to bed nor sleeping; he felt as if he could walk the night through, as if he could tramp to the North Pole and back by way of getting rid of some of his excitement.

So it was all settled, and Marty was his own, or very nearly his own. Dear little Marty! What a lucky devil he was! How lucky for him that he had taken his father's advice and gone in for a career in which family influence was of some use, instead of taking up newspaper work, as he had hankered to do in his Oxford days. Why, he might have been making a couple of hundred a year; he might have been making nothing. As it was, his income was safe, his place was safe as long as he behaved in an ordinary way, and his prospects would improve with every year that he was able to hang on in his position. Of course they wouldn't be rich on seven hundred a year, and Marty hadn't a penny; and yet he wondered how they lived if there was no money, and never would be any money. There were two servants—he had seen them both—and the house was kept up very nicely, and Marty was always well dressed. He could not make it out, till he came at last to the conclusion that Mrs Benyon had been merely using a figure of speech when she had said that she could not give Marty a fortune. And then he put it out of his mind, and determined he would think about it no more.

It was just half-past nine the following morning—a Sunday morning, by-the-bye—when he got down to find both his father and mother before him. He said not a word until breakfast had come to an end, and then he looked across the table at his mother.

"Mother," he said, "I have a piece of news for you."

"Have you, dear?" she returned.

"I am going to be married."

Mrs Etherington gave a very palpable start. "To be married! Are you? Oh, I hope she's nice."

The element of suspicion in her voice roused George, and put him on the defensive immediately. "Of course she's nice. You don't suppose I should want to marry a girl that wasn't nice, do you?"

"No, dear, I didn't quite mean in that way, but—well," with a little laugh, "I suppose it wouldn't work if the mothers picked out the wives for their sons."

"I don't suppose it would," said George, looking aggressively at nothing.

There was an awkward pause.

"Well?" said his mother.

"Well?" said George.

"Are you going to tell us nothing else?" Mrs Etherington went on, speaking in smooth accents. "Is she young, rich, poor, pretty, plain—? Come, George, tell us all about it."

"She's young," said George, "very young."

"Ah, she'll mend of that," put in the old gentleman from behind his newspaper.

"Yes," said George, "she'll mend of that, but I think she'll always be young. She's pretty—yes, I suppose she's pretty, but I don't know that you'd even call her that. She's fetching."

"I understand," said Mrs Etherington. "And her name?"

"Her name is Marty."

"Marty?"

"Her Christian name, that is. Her surname is Benyon."

"Benyon? Benyon? Does she live anywhere near here, George?"

"Yes, she lives in Rosediamond Road with her mother."

"Rosediamond Road? That's not very far away. Well?" said his mother.

"She has no money," said George, "or next to none."

"Ah!" The single word expressed whole volumes.

"But I've quite enough to begin on," said he, rather aggressively.

"I didn't say anything."

"It's a pity she has no money, I admit that," he went on. "She may have a little by-and-by, but it won't amount to much."

"I see. And you might have married anybody with your influence and your start."

"Of course," said George, "I know that you will be against the marriage. I expected it. I don't want to marry anybody, I want to marry somebody. She's the somebody I want to marry and I mean to marry."

"Very well, dear, there's nothing more to be said."

"Is there anything more you would like to know?"

"No."

"I am going to be married fairly soon," ended he.

Then Mrs Etherington looked at the clock. "I think it's time I went to get ready for church," she remarked. "We'll talk about this little affair later on, dear—later on." She patted his shoulder as if he were some dissatisfied schoolboy, and went out of

the room with an air of elegant dignity which was very hard to bear.

For some few seconds George Etherington sat still in his place, playing savagely with a few crumbs. Then the old gentleman looked up from his paper.

"What is there against the girl?" he inquired.

"Nothing—absolutely nothing."

"Oh! I thought from your tone and your manner that there was something you were keeping back."

"Not at all."

Colonel Etherington read a few lines, and then he looked at George again. "Is she a lady?" he asked.

"In herself—yes."

"In herself? I understand. It's a pity, it's a pity. Your mother won't take to it kindly."

"I don't suppose my mother would have taken kindly to anybody that I chose."

"I don't agree with you. She was quite satisfied with Effie's marriage. Who are this girl's people?"

"I don't know. She has a mother; father's dead. Mother is a plain, simple, unpretentious woman, as good as gold."

"I am sure of it. I'm sure the girl is as good as gold too, or you wouldn't have looked at her. But that's not quite everything, you see, from your mother's point of view."

"Yes, but I don't want my mother to marry her."

"No, no. But if you want your mother's approval, you must, of course, think a little of her ideas. However, it's no use quarrelling about it if you have fairly committed yourself."

"I have."

"Good. Then we must make the best of it. Take my advice, George, my boy—leave your mother to

work this matter out in her own way, and to take her own time. Let her come to it. Don't press her to go round all in a gush calling on the young lady and assuring her of her maternal solicitude. There's nothing like letting a woman negotiate an ugly fence in her own time."

"I beg you will remember—"

"I know, my dear boy. I'm speaking of your *fiancée*, your future wife. Well, it may be an ugly fence for your mother, all the same. For my part, I've always believed in people marrying those that they want to marry. One's marriage is a peculiarly personal arrangement, which doesn't much affect anybody but the two principal parties concerned. Yet it's a matter that outsiders always think themselves justified in interfering with, especially fathers and mothers. Don't upset yourself if your mother, and your sister for the matter of that, don't come round to your way of thinking the first few hours."

Some kindly instinct made George Etherington determine that he would not go to Rosediamond Road until he had seen his mother again. He therefore wrote a little note to tell Marty that he would not be able to go up to the Park with her, but that he would come on to see her later in the afternoon. "I want you and your mother," he ended, "to come up and dine with me at the Trocadero, or, if you would rather, we'll go down to Richmond and have dinner there. We can decide this point when I come.—Your devoted GEORGE."

Then he sat himself down to wait, with what patience he could, his mother's return from church. It was, perhaps, the longest morning that he had ever put in, tediously, wearisomely, laggingly long. He went out

in the garden and threw a stick for the dogs to run after, until he was tired of the game, and then he drew a big chair on to the bit of lawn and sat down to enjoy the morning paper which his father had finished with. No, he could take no interest in the events of the day; he didn't care what theatrical stars were in the ascendency, nor what race-horses were on the decline; he cared for nothing and nobody but Marty, and at last he gave himself up to lying back in the big chair, with his feet stretched far out in front of him, and his hands comfortably tucked in behind his head, and there he gazed on the blue sky and the few green trees, and thought of Marty until the morning's devotions were over and Mrs Etherington returned from church.

"Oh, you are here!" she said, with an accent of surprise. She, too, pushed a big chair into a place which was to her liking and sat down. "I've been thinking a good deal about you, Georgie," she said, with a sidelong affectionate look at him.

"Yes? I hope you have been thinking nice things, mother."

"I have been trying to," she said simply. Then she put out a well-gloved but distinctly sympathetic hand and said, "I wish you had fallen in love with a girl who had a little money."

"The governor fell in love with you, mother," was his reply.

"Yes, dear. But I always felt he would have done much better for himself if he had let his fancy stray where there was a silver lining, so to speak."

"Ah, well, I don't suppose the governor would agree with you, even to-day. And I've done the deed; it's no use looking back. You might as well

say that you wish I had fallen in love with a woman six feet high."

"No, no, Georgie, no."

"No?"

"Well, I wouldn't wish that. You must bring her to see me, Georgie."

"You—you—you—wouldn't you go to see her?" he stammered.

"I think not, dear; not the first time. You bring her to see me, and then I'll go and see her mother. A homely person, I think you said, George?"

"I did."

"Now tell me, darling boy, what does a homely person exactly mean? The kind of person that one would have for a housekeeper?"

"If you like to put it that way," said he, looking steadily in the opposite direction to his mother's face.

"I see. We sha'n't have much in common. Who was her father?"

"I don't know," said George.

"Oh, you don't know. I think it's rather important, dear, to know something about the father of the girl you are going to marry."

"I never asked. It only happened last night. In a way it was unexpected. Mrs Benyon never referred to her husband excepting once; then she called him 'my poor dear husband.' I have heard you speak of the governor as 'poor dear dad' many a time. It's a way wives have, and widows."

"Yes, you are quite right. There's nothing to be deduced from that. Well, my dear boy, I wish it had been otherwise, but, at the same time— Oh," with a change of tone, "here are Effie and Dick!"

Mrs Piers came towards them with that indescrib-

able air which seems to belong only to the young married woman—an air that seems to be made up of garments and perfume, of a certain self-consciousness and a certain style.

"Darling mother!" she said, bending the edge of her peach-bloom cheek to receive her mother's kiss. Then she, too, settled herself in a big chair and looked inquiringly at her mother. "Any news, dear?"

"Yes," said Mrs Etherington, simply, "great news. Georgie is going to be married."

"Georgie going to be married! Not the girl I saw you with in the Park, Georgie?"

"Very likely you did see me in the Park with Miss Benyon," said George.

"Miss Benyon!" repeated Mrs Piers, still more sharply. "Miss Benyon! No. 28 Rosediamond Road? Not No. 28 Rosediamond Road, Georgie?"

"Yes, No. 28 Rosediamond Road," said George, steadily.

"Good heavens, Effie," said her mother, "you know these people! What made you speak in that tone?"

"Know them! My dear mother, Mrs Benyon is a second-hand clothes-dealer!"

CHAPTER X

FAMILY FEELING

When Mrs Piers let fall the piece of information which was as a bombshell in the Etherington family, the effect of it was alike upon each and all. And yet it was different. Each one of her hearers gave a great start of surprise. Mrs Etherington grasped tight hold of the arms of her chair. Dick Piers let fall his eyeglass with a jerk, and it fell with a miniature clatter against the buttons of his coat. George sat bolt upright, feeling that war was declared at last, an angry red spot blazing out on either cheek.

"Effie," said Mrs Etherington, sharply, "do you realise what you are saying?"

"Of course I do, mother," said Mrs Piers, seating herself on the extreme edge of her garden seat and eyeing her mother with a gaze that was almost defiant in its certainty of knowledge.

"A second-hand clothes-dealer?" echoed Mrs Etherington. "And George proposes to marry the girl!"

"I don't exactly *propose* to marry the girl," said George. "I am *going* to marry her. There's a difference, you know."

"The thing is impossible!" said Mrs Etherington.

"A little injudicious!" put in Dick Piers.

"Brutal to your family!" added Effie.

"Not at all. Mrs Benyon is an honest, straight-

forward, unpretentious, good woman. I have the greatest respect for her. If I hadn't, I shouldn't propose to make her daughter daughter-in-law to my mother."

"Nobody said she wasn't respectable," said Mrs Piers, "but respectability isn't quite—"

"In this case it is *quite*," put in George Etherington. "I don't expect you to have any sympathy with me, Effie. I have never had very much with you; your line of life isn't the same as mine. You set store upon things that I set no store by at all. You believe mainly in the surface; I rest chiefly on the foundations. I am sorry if my *fiancée* doesn't please you. It's hard on a girl, don't you think, that she should be judged and condemned before you have even seen her?"

"I have seen her," said Mrs Piers.

"You saw her with me in the Park one day. Did that give you an impression against her?"

"I had an impression," said Mrs Piers, "that you were walking with somebody that you wouldn't like to introduce to me."

"On the contrary, I hadn't asked her permission to make her known to my people."

"Oh! All the same, George, I did receive an impression. It was that she was very pretty, and a little too smart."

"In the first place," said George, "she isn't pretty—even I don't pretend that she is. As to her being too smart, she is always properly, suitably, and daintily dressed."

"She would be." Mrs Piers let the words drop as only a young married woman can, and as only a young married woman can when speaking of an unmarried girl.

"I quite take your meaning, Effie," said George, by this time in a white rage of passion. "I don't consider it is worthy of you."

"And why?"

"Why? Because apparently you dress yourself in the same sorts. You bought the pink gown you wore the other night at Mrs Benyon's, didn't you? I confess, all of you, that I can't understand you, I can't understand the line that you have taken up. If I were engaged to the daughter of a fashionable milliner, or a fashionable dressmaker, or a fashionable anything, you wouldn't raise the least objection."

"You can't expect us to like it, George," said Mrs Etherington.

"I don't expect you to like it. I didn't expect you to like it when I broke the news to you; that would be too much. I don't ask you to receive my *fiancée*—"

"Is it gone so far as that?" asked Mrs Etherington, piteously.

"Yes, mother, it's gone quite as far as that. I'm engaged to Miss Benyon, and I'm going to marry Miss Benyon. If you don't like it, I'm sorry. There's never been a break between us," he went on, with a sudden wistfulness in his voice, "and I feel it's rather hard that there should be a break now because I've found the greatest happiness of my life. If you had seen her, disapproved of her, knew anything against her, then I could understand it; it would all be different: as it is, I'm sorry. I'm not going to alter my course. I couldn't in honour do it, even if I wished to oblige you thus far, which I don't." He got up from his chair, and moving a step nearer to his mother, said, "If you'll excuse me, mother, I'll not

stay at home to lunch to-day. I can't stand the subject being ragged over and discussed and made free with. If there is anything else to say, you and I can say it to each other when we are alone."

He bent down and kissed her, and without even a look at his sister and her husband strode away into the house.

Mrs Piers followed him with amazed eyes. "So it's nothing to do with either Dick or me," she remarked in a queer little chill voice. "Georgie is going to talk it over with you alone. I consider that I have a distinct right to be consulted in such a matter, seeing that whoever Georgie chooses to marry will reflect in a way upon me and upon my position."

Mrs Etherington took no notice of her words. "Effie," she said, "how came you to know anything about this Mrs Benyon?"

"Because I bought my rose-coloured dress there."

"How did you hear of her?"

"Oh, Mrs Macdonald told me. She gets everything she wears of her."

"You told me it was such a very select place, that it was such a dainty business, and that it was only real things from the very highest ranks that she sold."

"Oh, yes, I believe that is so. They are second-hand, all the same."

"But your rose-coloured dress has never been worn —at least, you said so."

"I know. Some of these great ladies take a dislike to a dress and don't put it on, or they have to go into mourning, or fifty things may happen so that they never wear certain of their things. You have to be judicious in choosing, and only select those that suit

you, and that haven't been worn, unless you don't mind. I confess I do."

"Yes, yes," said Mrs Etherington, "but— Oh, well, it's a thousand pities, it's no use pretending anything else. I don't know what Georgie could have been thinking of. You say the girl isn't pretty?"

"George said she isn't pretty," said Mrs Piers. "My impression was that she is decidedly pretty, but very much over-dressed."

"That's a pity, too. However, a few judicious hints, if she's sensible, may get rid of that; it's only a minor matter after all. The whole thing's a pity, but there, boys will go which way they like, and girls too for the matter of that. I'm sure never was a girl so headstrong in the way of her marriage as you were, Effie."

"Yes, I suppose I was."

"And yet you don't feel any sympathy with George on that account."

"No, I can't say I do. In my case it was the difference of choosing between a man I liked who was comparatively poor, and a man I didn't like who was extremely wealthy. As far as their class went they were on a perfectly equal footing. With this it's different. This girl will let us down; she's a little *person*."

"Well, well," said Mrs Etherington, "if George has made up his mind I suppose he'll take which course he likes, and we may as well save ourselves the trouble of even expressing an opinion. The best thing we can do is not to speak of it further than it has already gone. And there is the lunch bell!"

Meantime George had taken his hat and stick and had gone off to 28 Rosediamond Road. Marty, who

was playing a dreamy air at the piano, jumped up and flew across the room to meet him.

"Why, I thought you weren't coming till afternoon!" she cried.

"Aren't you pleased to see me now?" he demanded.

"Pleased? Yes, George, I am pleased, but it isn't quite the word for it, dearest boy! Have you lunched?"

"No, I haven't. I came to beg a little lunch of your mother."

"Mother will be delighted."

"Can you answer for that?"

"Oh, yes, I think I can. Mother's a hospitable soul, and loves to feed those in whom she takes an interest. You like my mother, George, don't you?" She looked at him sideways, as a bird sometimes does, and George, who had been feeling rather hard things about Mrs Benyon, softened instantly.

"Yes, I do. I like and respect and admire your mother, Marty," he replied.

"I'm glad of that. Some day I'll tell you all about mother. I'll tell you all she's done for us, how she's stood up and borne and done things that would have killed a weaker woman than she is, or one less devoted to her children."

"Tell me now," said he.

"Now? No, it would take too long. Dinner will be ready in five minutes. But I'll tell you what, George. Mother's going out to tea this afternoon—no, I wasn't going with her—she's going to see a great friend of hers—she often does on Sunday—and we shall have the house to ourselves, excepting for Sarah, or one of them, and then I'll tell you all

about it. Stay a moment! I must go and tell them to set a place for you."

She whisked out of the room, and George Etherington heard her light feet fleeting away down the passage. Then Mrs Benyon came in, and immediately after the lunch bell rang.

"I always have early dinner on Sunday," said Mrs Benyon, "because it's the only day in the week that I get a good meal between breakfast and dinner."

"How is that, Mater?" he asked.

"Well, my dear, business is business," she said in the most natural and simple way. "I tried, when I first came here, to have a bit of lunch like any other woman, and I found it didn't work; and so at last I gave it up, and I have a mere snack—a glass of stout and plate of nice appetising sandwiches, and that's all I can ever venture to trust myself to make a start on."

"That must be very hard work."

"Well, it is till you get used to it. I couldn't enjoy a piece of roast beef on any single day in the week at two o'clock; on Sunday I just love it. Now, tell me, George, do you like outside or inside?"

It was by this simple and homely phrase that George Etherington realised that it had been no fault, either of Marty's or her mother's, that he had not before become acquainted with their exact means of existence. It was a simple, unpretentious meal, well cooked and well served, but without any of the elaborate attention which Mrs Etherington was accustomed to exact from her servants.

And, later on, when Mrs Benyon had gone off in a cab to keep her engagement with her friend, the

lovers went back into the drawing-room and settled down for a couple of hours of uninterrupted talk. Then it was that Marty told him everything.

"I don't believe," she said, "in keeping secrets from those that are all the world to you. I never talk about mother's past, or our way of living or anything else to outsiders, because I don't see, as long as we are respectable and pay our way, that it matters to them. But with you it's different. I'm not half good enough for you, George, in one way, and yet—Oh, I know exactly what you are going to say!—and yet I'm quite good enough for you in another. There's only one thing, dearest, that does trouble me, and that is the thought of what your people will say when they've found out we're going to be married."

CHAPTER XI

IRREVOCABLE

When Marty confessed to George Etherington that she was troubled at the thought of what his people's attitude towards her might be, he felt that the time had come when he must speak, and speak quickly and to the point.

"Marty, my darling," he said, and he held her a little closer even than he had done before, "I wanted to say something to you this afternoon, and I don't want you to misunderstand me in any way. You'll —you'll be patient with my people, won't you?"

"That's a funny way of putting it," said Marty. "What do you quite mean by it, Georgie?"

"Well, I mean this," he said. "Supposing that my mother doesn't quite see things in the same light as we do just at first, you'll not make it more difficult for me, will you?"

"I don't think I quite understand you."

"Well," he went on, half hesitatingly, "your mother's got used to the idea of me. I've been coming to the house for months now. Her own common-sense must have told her exactly what to expect."

A sudden recollection of a conversation which she had had with her mother on the subject of George, and whether he was "true blue" or not, caused Marty to crimson all over her dimpling face. It was a

sudden hot, almost shamed flush. "Go on," she said briefly.

Fortunately George also had something to hide. He wanted to keep from Marty for the present a full account of all that had happened that morning—the shameful way his sister had put things, the look of horror on his mother's face, the horrified accents of his mother's voice; so fortunately he was not looking at Marty, and he never saw that tell-tale blush which was so embarrassing to her at that moment.

"All this has been sprung on my mother," said George, in a tone that was almost apologetic.

"You have told her?" said Marty.

"Yes, I told you I should. It's no use wasting time and beating about the bush; besides, I want to be married as soon as possible."

"And your mother refuses her consent?" said Marty.

"No, no; she does nothing of the kind. I haven't asked it, for one thing. A man doesn't ask his people's consent to his marriage; I'm not dependent on them in any way."

"But it's against their wishes," said Marty.

"They haven't even said that much. I haven't really talked it over with my mother yet—not seriously, you understand."

"What did she say?" demanded Marty.

"'Pon my word, I can hardly tell you."

"She wasn't pleased?"

"No, I can't say she was pleased. But then, you know, she wasn't pleased when my sister got married."

"Why not?"

"Because there was somebody she would rather Effie had married instead of Piers."

"Oh! Is there somebody she would rather you married instead of me?"

George laughed outright. "No, I don't think there is. But, my dear child, she doesn't know you, she has never seen you. You have come in and stolen me, so to speak, and I believe, from all I have heard, most mothers would feel the same."

"I don't know," said Marty. "I think if I had a child," she went on, looking at the fire dreamily, "I think I should think more of that child's happiness than of any other consideration."

"We all think so when we are thinking of ideals," said George. "I have had a dream more than once of taking my wife to my father and mother, and her youth and beauty conquering all feelings of opposition."

"Not since you have known me," said Marty, the smiles beginning to twinkle out again upon her unusually grave face.

"Well, no, not since I have known you," George confessed.

"That's as well," said she. "But what am I going to do? Are they coming to see me?"

"'Pon my word, I don't know." Then the arm about Marty's waist drew her a trifle closer. "Supposing they do nothing? Supposing they don't come? Supposing that they ignore us altogether? You—you won't let it make any difference to us?"

"It won't make any difference to me," said Marty, "as I have never met them. One can't miss what one never had. There can't be any loss on my side; it will make no difference to me; but to you, Georgie, to *you*—"

"Well," said he in a sturdy, even dogged kind of

tone, "the longer I live the more convinced I am of the extraordinary amount of wisdom to be found between the covers of the Bible. There's one phrase that I have heard over and over again without attaching any importance to it at all—'A man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife.' It's just this, my darling—I want to give my people every chance of doing the right thing if they will; if they won't, I consider that I have got ample grounds for following the best advice in the world. I don't want to leave my father and my mother. I've always been, and I am, and I always shall be very fond of them, but if it comes to a question of my parents or my wife, I shall follow the example of my father and do as he did before me."

"And you say your sister pleased herself?"

"Most emphatically so. There were two fellows in love with her at the same time," George went on briskly, thankful to get off the more personal question. "Piers was one, and the other was a man she met staying at a country house. He was an undeniable catch; I suppose it was natural that my mother should want her to marry him. Effie, however, was adamantine."

"She was really in love with Mr Piers?"

"Oh, yes, there was never any doubt about that."

"Was there anything against the other man?"

"No. He was ten years or so older than Piers; but Piers is a young chap, you know."

"And was he equally good-looking?"

"Better looking, I think. Had a big place in the country, and a house in Park Street. I think myself that it was natural my mother should want her to marry the best man of the two."

"But was he the best man of the two?"

"I don't know. He was everything that was desirable, and he had heaps of money. He was awfully in love with Effie—heart-broken when she chose Piers."

"Mrs Piers has a will of her own, then?"

"Very much so," said George, drily, and with a vivid recollection of Effie's stinging remarks during the earlier part of the day.

"It is Mrs Piers who is the chief opponent to me—to your marrying me?" said Marty.

"Er—perhaps."

For a moment the girl was silent. "Then it's good-bye to any more Doucet gowns for Mrs Richard Piers," she said, with a chuckle, or at least what would have been a chuckle in an elderly gentleman blessed with a keen sense of humour, and George fairly shouted with delight, feeling that Marty was worth any sacrifice he might be called upon to make for her.

By-and-by, when they had had tea, they went for a little walk together, and by common consent they touched no further upon unpleasant subjects, but confined themselves to talking of the glorious time that lay in front of them.

"You know, we sha'n't be well off," said George. "Should you say, Marty, that a flat or a house would be the best?"

"Well, a flat will cost the most, but we can do with one servant; and in a flat I could do a great deal that I can't and won't do in a house," said Marty, promptly. "You see, dear, you do pay a little more in rent, there's no getting over that fact. I know what I should like to do," she added.

"Well, tell me."

"I should like to have a flat—a weeny tiny flat, you know, George, somewhere not very far from the Stores."

"Oh, in Victoria Street?"

"Well, somewhere about there; somewhere within a penny 'bus ride of the Stores, so that I could go down every morning and do my shopping; and the nearer it is the less would it cost, because I could take my own servant with me to bring back things; or I could do as a friend of mine does who was married not very long ago and lives near the Stores. She hires one of the old men that stand outside. She pays him twopence or threepence, fourpence if the basket is very heavy. She saves that fourpence about twenty times over in the things she buys."

"Are you sure?"

"I am quite sure. You see, I've done all mother's shopping for her since I came home. I know all about housekeeping. Oh, you can't take me in. I've one maxim, Georgie—the best of everything at the lowest possible price."

"Very good maxim, too, Well, it would suit me well enough. The only thing is we should have to pay such an awful whack for rent."

"Not at all. Not if you know how to look about you. I shouldn't go to one of the grand mansions and ask a first-floor suite."

"No, I suppose not," said George. And then they fell to laughing, as if between them they had propounded the most wonderful joke in the whole world.

It seemed as if George Etherington was fated to begin and end that day unpleasantly. He left

Rosediamond Road soon after ten o'clock, and he found his mother sitting in the dining-room reading a novel.

"Your father has gone to bed," she said. "He's not very well to-night. I believe he is going to have one of his bad attacks."

"You don't say so?"

"I'm afraid so."

"That was the lobster salad," said George.

"I'm afraid it was. I told him not to have any of it, but you know your father's sanguine temperament. It's always all right at the time, and he never admits it to be all wrong until the day of reckoning has arrived."

"Poor dad! What have you given him?"

"All sorts of things, my dear boy. I've left him now to try and settle down to sleep. Perhaps we shall ward the attack off."

"And you? You are all right, mother?"

"Ye-s, thank you." Her tone was doubtful. "I am as right as I could wish to be, thanks. I wanted to say something to you, George."

"Hadn't you better leave it for another time, when you are less worried?"

"No, I don't believe in leaving things," said Mrs Etherington, carefully marking the place in her book and then closing it. "I don't believe in leaving things, Georgie," she went on, and he noticed how pale she was looking. "George, is it quite irrevocable?"

"I'm am afraid quite, mother."

"You are *afraid?*"

"Well, I don't mean it in that sense, I said it out of a sort of politeness. It *is* irrevocable."

"Quite irrevocable?"

"Yes, mother, it is quite irrevocable—as irrevocable as if we were already married."

"Is she very nice, this girl?"

"She is something more than nice. She is not at all like Effie, but she is—well, she is the one woman in the world that I want."

"You know Effie will never come round."

"No? Well, in that case we must try and do without Effie."

"She is your sister."

"And the other will be my wife. I'm afraid it's no good, mother. My father ran away with you and your people objected. You went your way—which happened to be his way—and so far as I know you have never repented it."

For a moment Mrs Etherington did not speak. "Your father was a gentleman, George," she said at last.

"I don't know that your people thought so, mother."

"No," she said, fairly enough, "I don't know that they did. But it was rather different."

"There's a great difference between *meum* and *tuum*," said George, quietly.

"There's a greater difference than that. I have been thinking all day of what you told me yourself and of what Effie told me. I've been putting the pieces together, and they fit, my boy, too well. The girl is beneath you. No, I'm not saying anything personal. You needn't look at me in that fierce way. I'm speaking dispassionately. The girl is beneath you in social position; her mother is not my equal; her father was—? You don't seem

to know. She's young, probably extremely good-looking, very attractive, but—"

"But I'm not marrying her father and mother!" cried George.

"That's what everybody says," said Mrs Etherington, deliberately.

CHAPTER XII

A STATE VISIT

In due course of time Mrs Etherington made what might be called a state call at No. 28 Rosediamond Road. She did not announce her intention of doing so to her son, because she wished the visit to be made without the help of his presence. So, a few days after her conversation with George, she dressed herself and, without a word to anyone as to her intention, she went off to No. 28 Rosediamond Road.

The excellent Sarah, recovered from her attack of the influenza, came to the door in answer to her knock. "Yes, madam," she said, "Mrs Benyon is at home. But it's after business hours," she added.

"I have not come to see Mrs Benyon on business, thank you," said Mrs Etherington. "Please say that Mrs Etherington is here."

Mrs Benyon came to her immediately.

"I'm Georgie's mother," Mrs Etherington announced.

"I'm sure," said Mrs Benyon, very much overawed by the dignity, not to say majesty, of her visitor, "I am very much honoured by your visit, Mrs Etherington."

"That is very nice and kind of you," said Mrs

Etherington, standing up and looking exceedingly large in the little drawing-room.

"Won't you be pleased to sit down?" said Mrs Benyon, indicating the largest chair that the room contained.

Mrs Etherington half hesitated, as if waiting for her hostess to seat herself. Then she took the proffered seat with an air as if it had been a throne. "I suppose you were not as much startled by the news as I was, Mrs Benyon?" the visitor began.

"Yes, it came with a shock upon me," Mrs Benyon confessed.

"And yet my son has been coming here for months. What else did you expect?"

"One never knows what to expect in such matters," said Mrs Benyon, quietly.

"No? Well, it's the old story of fire and tow, I suppose. But — er — but — am I not to see George's *fiancée*?"

"You shall see Marty, certainly." Mrs Benyon got up and rang the bell. "Ask Miss Marty to come down, Sarah," she said to that excellent person. "I think she's in her bedroom. Tell Ann to go up; don't go yourself. My maid," she added with a smile of apology to Mrs Etherington as soon as the door had closed, "has just got over an attack of the influenza, and running up and down stairs is not good for her."

"Very trying," said Mrs Etherington, who was not much given to considering her domestics. "There is one subject I must confess I should like to discuss," she went on, looking round the walls of the pretty room and noting that it was all very tasteful and dainty. "What are they going to live upon?"

"Your son—George has seven hundred a year," said Mrs Benyon, in a tone which conveyed something of astonishment, or at least of wonder.

"Yes, yes, he has; and up to now—up to the present time, I should say—he has spent it. It isn't a great income for young people to begin a family on."

"Perhaps there won't be a family," said Mrs Benyon.

"It's no use reckoning on that," replied Mrs Etherington, looking out of the window in a way which showed off her aristocratic profile to the best advantage. "I've tried, Mrs Benyon; I know."

"What! Then you married for—er—"

"Yes," said Mrs Etherington, with an air of making quite a clean breast of it, "Colonel Etherington and I ran away. Between ourselves, we were very foolish. My people were furious. They thought I ought to have married somebody with a million. I wanted the man who had everything else—quite everything excepting the million—and we married, feeling that for people following the drum it was unwise, to say the least of it, to dream of having a family. I have five children living," she added.

"Dear, dear, dear!" said Mrs Benyon, in a tone intended to convey sympathy with the little Etheringtons not lost but gone before.

If the simpler and more homely woman had intended to touch a tender chord by her ejaculation she failed in her object. Mrs Etherington continued to gaze out of the window, and also to speak. "They are very young, our children, Mrs Benyon," she said. "If they rush into matrimony now they may not stop at five, they may have ten, and an income that

will do very well for two to scrape along on will be a very tight pinch if it has to be divided by twelve."

"I don't believe," said Mrs Benyon, in her gentlest voice, "that the Lord ever sends mouths but He sends bread to put into them."

Mrs Etherington absolutely shuddered. "Ah, I see you are an advocate for early marriage," she said. "Well, I suppose it's no use either of us having views. These young people are headstrong, and will take their own way, and take it in their own time. I think it's a pity myself. However, it is certainly not for me to say that they shall not have a voice in their own affairs, seeing," she added, with a conscious little laugh, "that I took the management of mine entirely into my own hands."

"It seems to me," said Mrs Benyon, clasping her hands tightly together until the knuckles shone out white by reason of the pressure that she was putting on them, "it seems to me, Mrs Etherington, that you must either have come to that decision very young, or else you have worn extremely well to be the mother of a fine young fellow like your son is."

Mrs Etherington smiled in spite of herself. All women love a compliment, and I think, if you will believe me, there comes a time in life when they love it better from a woman than they do from a man. "Now you are flattering me," she said.

"Such was far from my thoughts," declared the other, simply. "I am not used to the ways of the world. I am a simple, unpretentious, anxious woman, who wants to do the best she can for the three little girls that were left for her to fill both father's and mother's place to."

"And your daughter is like you?"

"I don't think so—no. I think she favours her poor father. She's been well educated, you understand, Mrs Etherington. When it was a hard pinch for me to do it, I put Marty to a first-class school, and she's paid me over and over again for any sacrifice I might have had to make. I spared nothing that was reasonable, and my girls will go out into the world with a very different education to what their mother had."

"I think that was very wise of you," said Mrs Etherington, who felt the conversation beginning to lag somewhat.

"The little ones are younger than Marty. They are at school. They don't remember any of the struggles that Marty remembers. They don't remember their father."

"Mr Benyon was — er — was — er—a lawyer?" suggested the visitor.

"No, Mrs Etherington, my husband was not in the law. He was a plain business man."

"I don't quite understand," said Mrs Etherington in a bland tone of wilful misunderstanding.

"My husband was in a bank," said Mrs Benyon, quietly.

"In a bank? Oh, yes, yes, I see. In a private bank?"

"Yes, it was a private bank," said the widow. "He was there from a young boy to the day of his death. He had never any pretensions to be more than he was—a plain business man that had no ideas above his position."

"A good husband to you?" interposed Mrs Etherington.

"The greatest trouble that I had was the day that

he died and left me to face the world with three little girls."

"I must say," said Mrs Etherington, "that you seem to have done well by them. I—it has never been my lot to face anything except the anger of my relations before marriage—and occasionally after. I I don't know how I should do under those circumstances, I'm sure; probably not a quarter as well as you have done. I know all about your business, Mrs Benyon. I think it very clever and original of you. My daughter has been."

"Mrs Piers? Yes, she has been here once."

Then the door opened and Marty came in.

"Marty," said Mrs Benyon, getting up from her chair, "this is George's mother."

"Mrs Etherington!" cried Marty.

Then George's mother rose also. "Yes, George's mother, my dear. Come to pay a very informal visit, come to see what George's choice is like."

Marty put her two hands out, and somehow her head went a little on one side. "I hope George's mother isn't disappointed in George's choice," she said, in a voice that betokened she was not very far off from tears, and was yet putting a brave effort upon herself to keep as bright as possible. "I know, Mrs Etherington, I'm not half good enough for Georgie. I've told him so fifty times."

"And if you told him that fifty times more in that tone of voice, and with that look on your face," said Mrs Etherington, drily, "each time will only serve to rivet George's chains a little more closely about him. I—my dear, I will confess it—I was not pleased when Georgie told me his news. I thought he—I thought he might have married a girl with money.

Mothers always have that dream, you know, and I am like all other mothers—I think there is nobody like my boy. I thought perhaps he wasn't sure, that it might be but a fancy—I didn't encourage him in any way, quite the contrary—but these last few days I have been thinking a good deal about the whole affair, and I've come to the conclusion that whatever I do George will follow his own way, no matter how happy or how miserable it may make him afterwards. It's no use my holding aloof until the deed is done, and then standing off in a frigid attitude, or submitting with an ill grace. I told myself to-day that if I didn't go and make acquaintance with the girl he has chosen I should never know what she is like, should never know whether he is right or wrong. And so I came. I won't gush to you, I won't pretend that I shouldn't have been much better pleased if you had had as much money as George, but I—I see a little how George sees you ; and by-and-by, if you are good to him, I hope I shall come to see you entirely with his eyes."

"Mrs Etherington," said Marty, "please do sit down again. I can't bear to see you standing. If you don't mind," she went on, standing in front of the great lady, and looking at her as simply as a little child might do, "if you don't mind, I'd rather not say anything. I didn't know you were coming to-day ; you have taken us by surprise, mother and me, and we are not prepared with anything nice to say, so I'd rather not say anything. And I believe in deeds. You will see for yourself how I behave to George, and whether I make him happy ; and I shall be quite content if you will take me on those grounds alone and on no other. Darling," she went

on, turning to her mother, "shall I ask Sarah to bring some tea?"

"I think I hear Sarah," replied Mrs Benyon.

A moment later the door was opened by an unseen hand, and the estimable Sarah sailed in bearing a tea-tray. The setting of afternoon tea, and the arranging of dinner-tables, had been an item of education at the school at Folkestone. There was really nothing to find fault with in the way that the tray was arranged or the tea served. Mrs Etherington could have wished that Mrs Benyon had not thought it necessary to open the lid of the tea-pot and stir up the contents with a spoon, but the tea was undeniably excellent, the muffin which accompanied it was properly brown, and there had been no stint of the butter with which it was spread —or I should say soaked—and Marty did the waiting between the tea-table and the visitor with an air of girlish eagerness which was gratifying to that lady's sense of what was due to herself.

And then the door opened and George Etherington, without his hat, came in all of a rush. "*Mother!*" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XIII

A FELLOW-FEELING

WHEN George Etherington and his mother left Rosediamond Road, neither spoke until they had turned the corner of the street. Then George looked at his companion. "Well, mother?" he said.

"Well?" said Mrs Etherington, in a non-communicative tone.

"What do you think of her?" said he.

"What do I think? My dear boy, exactly what I thought before. I think you are making a mistake, and sooner or later you will find it out. I may be wrong, but I don't think that I am. If I am, all the better for you; if I am not, all the worse."

"Mother, dear, why do you think that I am making a mistake?"

"Because, for one thing, the girl isn't of your own class."

"Oh, class!"

"Yes, I know. All young people say the same. The mother asked me if I 'wouldn't be pleased to sit down.'"

"Well?"

"Well," said Mrs Etherington, looking straight in front of her, "you never heard me ask anybody if 'they would be pleased to sit down.'"

"I can't see what it matters," said George. "If

you were in France you would say, 'Donnez-vous le peine de vous assoir, Madame, je vous prie.'"

"We are not in France," said Mrs Etherington, looking stonily in front of her. "There's an old saying, George—'When you are in Rome, do as the Romans do.'"

It must be confessed that George Etherington did not quite see where the application of the "old saying" came in, but that was neither here nor there. He felt a sudden revulsion against his class, a feeling that his class was wrong, that the simple woman who asked you to be pleased to sit down was the truly polite woman.

"It's a little thing, mother," he said.

"Yes, it's a little thing," said Mrs Etherington, "but straws show which way the stream flows, and the straws of Mrs Benyon's conversation and manners were quite sufficient to show me the class of life from which Mrs Benyon has risen—hewers of wood and drawers of water, my dear. I should say in her young days she was a servant."

"I don't see," said George, "that she is any the worse for that."

"No, my dear, I don't say that she is; the greater credit for her that she has been able to make a living for herself and her children. I couldn't do it myself, and Heaven knows what would have become of you all if I had been left penniless with several young children depending upon me. Still, although one doesn't deny all the virtues that certain individuals possess—on the contrary, one extols them—no person of my class wants to prove their appreciation to the extent of marriage. You are glamoured with the girl; she's a fresh little thing, probably as good as gold. Will it last you, George? Will it last you?"

"I don't see why it shouldn't. You and my father have lasted out with each other."

"You don't seem quite to understand the difference," said Mrs Etherington, quietly. "The objection of my people to your father was an objection of money merely—of worldly wealth, or the want of it. When your father goes into his club, there's no outside difference, no external difference between himself and a duke. If anybody pointed him out as the Duke of Chelsea, the person to whom he was pointed out would probably say that he was a fine-looking man, or something of that kind. They wouldn't say that he ought to have been a groom."

"No, no. I grant you that."

"You must be prepared," Mrs Etherington went on, speaking in a cold, level, rather cutting voice, "you must be prepared when you are married for people to look, if they don't say—'Who did young George Etherington marry? Had she any people? Where did she come from?' You must be prepared, every now and again, until you have tutored her into our ways, to have your teeth set on edge. Don't think me unkind, George; I have no wish to be that. I have done the decent thing. I have called, I have called within a reasonable time of hearing of your engagement; I have called, indeed, as soon as I felt sure that you really meant what you said. I did my best to be nice. I think I've left those two poor things charmed with me; they feel that I am not going to oppose the girl because I didn't choose her myself; but I have had my eyes open all the time. Georgie, can you tell me on your word of honour, from a son to his mother, a son who has never given his mother a lie or an uneasy moment until now, can you assure

me that it hasn't already happened, and that you haven't yourself noticed little things that grated on you? Now I have put the question to you fair and square. Answer me the truth."

For some thirty or forty yards they walked on in dead silence. A blazing flush had risen to George Etherington's face, which, after a minute or so, receded, leaving it ghastly white.

"I think all these things are beneath a man's notice," he said, at last.

"You have answered my question," said his mother. "You have answered it as I wish before God you had not answered it. George, you are making a mistake. I don't say the girl isn't charming, I don't say she isn't good, but she's not been born and bred in your own class, and although you may feel now that these things are too petty to notice, that these things are too small to have any effect, that your love will override all such trifles, how will you feel when you hear your wife, in the society of your equals, making mistakes about titles, asking your friends 'please to take a seat'? They won't think such trifles beneath their notice, take my word for that. They will notice every little slip. How will you feel, Georgie, when you see the upraised eyebrow, the quick look between two who have noticed the same little flaw? Do you think your love will be strong enough to withstand all that? If you don't, think, think, and I say again—think!"

For a few seconds George Etherington felt like one who has had a pail of water suddenly and unexpectedly flung in his face. Then, with what was almost a gasp, he mastered his emotions sufficiently to speak. "You hit very hard, mother," he said.

"Not below the belt," said his mother.

"I'm not so sure about that. You didn't mean to, that I know, of course; but it hits hard."

"I am not going to say another word," said Mrs Etherington. "I am not going to make your life a burden to you. I have said my say. I'll ask the girl to dinner; I suppose we ought to ask her mother."

"She won't come."

"There she would show her sense. However, the proper thing is to ask her, and I will ask her. And now, Georgie, until you speak of it me, I shall say little or nothing. You'll not go on from sheer pride if you should change in any way? Never do that. I've never believed myself in the honour of continuing an engagement which is practically certain to lead to an unhappy marriage. One reads of these things in story books," she went on, not looking up at George but straight in front of her; "in real life they do not often happen, and my opinion of them is that they are criminal, absolutely criminal."

At this point they reached the door of their own house, and there they separated, each going to their respective rooms. Mrs Etherington was just fastening her dress, when the old colonel came into his dressing-room.

"Well, Madge," he said, "done the deed?"

Mrs Etherington fastened the last hook into its place before she replied. "Yes, dear boy," she said, "I've done the deed."

"What is she like?"

"Very young, very fetching. I should say as good as gold, and—as common as dirt."

"You don't say so!"

"She was on her best behaviour with me, naturally enough. The mother is a simple, unpretentious, unassuming, respectful woman of no class, very much overawed at my visit. The girl has nothing of that about her—she was on her best behaviour—but beneath it I could see that she would be pert, and probably presuming, to the last extent. She has the directness and downrightness of a street flower-girl, cloaked over with a veneer of boarding-school education. She is very much in love with George, very anxious to do the right thing and be a credit to him, and quite sure that nobody in the wide world could make him happy but herself."

"Did she tell you all this?"

"No, no, no! She was on her best behaviour. I gathered it, I saw it. I can't tell you, dear old boy, how we women understand one another—we do, somehow."

"Nobody understands anything about you women," said the colonel, standing looking at his wife with eyes full of admiration, his hands thrust deep down into his trouser pockets. "I have lived with you for nearly thirty years, darling, and I don't understand you a bit better to-day than I did the first day that I ever saw you!"

The wife's face flushed, and her hand trembled a little as she picked up a brooch from the dressing-table and fixed it with long, delicate fingers in the bosom of her gown. "Geoffrey," she said, "there's one thing that you do know about me, there's one thing that you will admit—I'm not unjust, I'm not hard-hearted."

"Not the least in the world. But it's no use breaking your heart over this business; it may come

off, it may not. If we oppose it and make his life wretched—"

"Oh, it will hurry it on. I know that. I shall say nothing more about the girl. I've told George that I intend to ask her to dinner."

"What! Have you seen him?"

"He came whilst I was there. He was so surprised to see me that he almost jumped out of his skin. We came home together. He asked me my opinion, and I told him if he marries her he will always love her—in a way she is irresistible. If he can school her out of certain slips—commonnesses, as I told him, straws which showed what class she came from—he may be happy enough; at the same time there is no money, there is no influence, there is nothing but personal liking and a number of drawbacks. However, I see the wisdom of not worrying him into an earlier marriage."

"And you have asked her to dinner?"

"I haven't asked her yet. I'll write a little note in the morning. I suppose I shall have to ask the mother."

"Oh, yes; you must do the decent thing."

"I suppose it is the decent thing. Anyway, I'll do it; I'm quite prepared to do it. I think I'll ask them for Saturday evening."

"Just as you like," said the colonel, heartily, "do exactly as you like. I suppose you won't ask Effie and Dick?"

"Oh, I might ask them," said Mrs Etherington, laughing for the first time. "They wouldn't come. He would, but Effie wouldn't."

"I don't quite see that Effie has got any right to take such mortal offence in the matter."

"I suppose," said Mrs Etherington, "that all brothers and sisters feel they've got a right to interfere with their brothers and sisters. I know mine did. The scorn that Catherine poured upon me when I was under discussion about you was absolutely limitless."

"And yet," said the colonel, "Catherine did no such great things with her own life. Married a chap with a title who hadn't tuppence-ha'penny to keep it up on, and who ran away with another woman, leaving her with three small children. Well, wife, probably we did a very foolish thing when we married, you and I—you certainly made but a very poor match of it—but such as I am, I stuck to you, and I shall stick to you till the end!"

CHAPTER XIV

A TRIAL TRIP

I HAVE said that Mrs Benyon was never able to eat what she called a "sit-down lunch"; indeed, the table was never laid for such a meal. A large tray, with plates, glasses, and a good dish of sandwiches, and usually some sponge cakes—or what is called a "cake to cut"—was set out on the table by one o'clock. With this, and a glass of stout, she was able to ward off faintness and fatigue during the hours of business.

The following morning after Mrs Etherington's visit, Marty went into the dining-room to find a letter lying on the table addressed to her mother. "I never heard the postman," she murmured, as she picked it up. It was addressed in a firm and bold hand, and the back of the envelope bore a neat crest—a cock holding a dagger in one foot, while it balanced itself decorously on the other. Having enjoyed this edifying spectacle, Marty laid the letter down again, and just then her mother walked into the room.

"Here's a letter for you, darling!" said Marty. "A gorgeous letter. You must have got a new client. Look at the crest on the back! Did you ever see such a rampant beast in your life? Fancy balancing yourself on one claw like that, and eternally holding

out a dagger with the other! Do open it, darling, and see who it is from."

So Mrs Benyon opened the letter, and read it slowly aloud.

"'My dear Mrs Benyon,'" she began,—"'Colonel Etherington and I—'

Oh, it's from your mother-in-law, Marty!" she interposed.

"Go on," said Marty, a pink flush rising in her face, and a terrible qualm taking possession of her heart.

—"'will be very much pleased if you and Marty —I suppose I may call her so—will dine with us, quite in a friendly way, on Saturday evening at half-past seven. With kind regards, believe me, very truly yours, Margaret Etherington.'"

The faint flush in Marty's cheeks had deepened to a fine flaming rose colour. "Well?" she said eagerly. "You'll go, of course?"

Mrs Benyon sat down and helped herself to a sandwich. It was not to her the same question of desperate import that it was to Marty. "Give me my stout, Marty, dear," she said, "or I shall have a dozen ladies clamouring at the door ready to tear me to pieces."

"Oh, of course, darling! I beg your pardon. I am a little beast to neglect you as I do!" She gave her mother a joyous hug as she whisked to the sideboard to fetch the stout. "You'll go, of course?" she said as she carefully poured it out.

Mrs Benyon looked at her with troubled eyes. "I

don't think I will, Marty, dear," she said. "I have never been in the way of having dinner with people like the Etheringtons. I should be all at sea."

"Nonsense!"

"Oh, yes, I should," said Mrs Benyon, wisely. "It's all very well for you, Marty. You went to a good boarding-school where they taught you all these things as part of your education. I didn't. I should be sure to forget which knife I was using, or do something horrible. It would be like being in purgatory for a whole evening. No, no, dearie; afternoon tea I've got thoroughly up to—I flatter myself I can manage that with anybody—but when you come to dinner with half a dozen courses, I really couldn't sit through it!"

Poor woman, she was really quite unconscious that it was not the highest etiquette to lift a tea-pot lid and stir the contents with a tea-spoon; but, as George would have said, it was a small thing and of no importance.

"I shall feel horrid if you don't go," said Marty.

"You'll feel a deal horrider if I do," remarked Mrs Benyon, sensibly. "As for me, I shall never bring myself to sit down to table with that grand lady. *You* have got to do it; you have got to get used to it; it's part of the business of your life, and there's no getting over, or under, or round it, my darling; but for *me*, George isn't marrying me, and his mother will only realise what a sensible person I am if I take my own stand from the very beginning."

So it was decided that Mrs Benyon would not accept the invitation to dine with Colonel and Mrs Etherington. Then Marty was naturally very much

excited about her costume. On that point, however, she consulted her *fiancé*.

"I want you to tell me, George," she said, "the kind of dress I ought to wear when I go to dine with your mother on Saturday."

"Well, evening dress, of course," said he.

"Oh. Low body?"

"Yes—with sleeve things; the kind of dress you'd wear for a theatre."

"One of my best dresses, or not?"

"Not one of your best dresses. A little simple frock like you'd go to a theatre in."

"Won't your mother be offended if I don't make myself look smart?"

"No, she's much more likely to be offended if you do."

"Do I wear gloves, Georgie?"

"No, certainly not!"

Marty looked up quite apologetically. "Georgie," she said, "you ought to have married somebody that would know all these things. I feel it more every day. If you think you are making a mistake, and that your people don't like it, well—you know I'll not keep you to your bargain."

"Indeed you will keep me to my bargain!" said George, quite fiercely. "As for knowing all about it—pooh! these are trifles, nothing, as against the greater events of life. Besides, it's quite natural you shouldn't know. You have never dined with my people, you don't know the style that we live in, you wouldn't like to overdo it or underdo it, so you ask me who do know—it's perfectly natural."

"I thought you—I thought you spoke as if—as if I ought to have known."

"Not at all. You misunderstood me entirely." He had spoken so, but perhaps he was none the worse for denying it.

"You know, George," she said, looking at him with pleading eyes, "it's a serious thing for me to go to be introduced to your family."

"As to my family," said George, "I don't know that they will be there."

"What! Not your sister?"

"She might have an engagement, you know," said George. "It wasn't very long notice."

"Oh, I see."

"What do you see?" he demanded.

"Another point. She mightn't want to come. I feel as if your sister was going to be my enemy all through."

"Nonsense! I don't suppose she'll be particularly friendly—that would be a little too much to expect—because Effie is—well, she's Effie, and she thinks an awful lot of being Effie—far too much. Possibly, the two boys may show; I don't know. It won't make the least difference whether they do or not. They don't interfere with me any more than I do with them. I shouldn't allow it for a moment. They'll be civil enough to you, no fear about that."

"And you think Effie won't?"

"I think it's more than likely she won't. Effie's a difficult young person. Not that she matters; Effie has never been anything to me, or I to Effie. It's only my father and mother who really matter—and *me*, you know!"

And then they fell to laughing like the boy and girl that they were.

On the appointed evening Marty arrived at Colonel

Etherington's house. Thanks to her consultation with George, she was looking extremely nice. She was not a little nervous, but fortunately nervousness did not with her take the form of putting on airs of undue familiarity. If it had done so, I can only say that the evening would have been a failure, and Marty would have been ruined—speaking socially, that is to say. For although outwardly she was quite everything that could be desired, there were many little slips which, even if they passed the eye of Colonel Etherington, were seen and inwardly stored up by his wife. Fully aware of her possible deficiencies, Marty kept an eagle eye upon her hostess, so she got fairly well through the uneasy labyrinths of the most elaborate dinner that she had, up to that time, ever been called upon to eat.

Then Mrs Etherington took her off to the drawing-room to face a terrible half-hour before the colonel and his three sons should come to join them.

"I see you have got an engagement ring," said Mrs Etherington, very pleasantly, as they stood near the open window. She took the girl's hand in hers and examined the ring which adorned it—a large and lustrous sapphire surrounded by diamonds. "It's a very smart ring indeed," she said as she released the hand. "You mustn't let Georgie be extravagant, you know; that's his weakness. Of course, if you're going to have a long engagement, I won't preach at you, but if, as I gather, you intend to have a very short one, I must preach prudence and carefulness, or you will find your seven hundred a year gone before you can turn round."

"I don't know that we are going to have a very long engagement," said Marty.

"Ah! For some things it's a pity; for others, of course, it's just as well. For my part, I should have been tempted to—well—er—you must excuse me, my dear, saying it?"

"Oh, yes, certainly."

"Well, I think it would have been wiser, more politic, more prudent. You would have got into Georgie's ways."

"Georgie thinks not," said Marty; "Georgie thinks that the sooner we are married, the quicker I shall get into his ways."

"All men do; no man likes waiting to be married; no man sees the prudence, or the force, or the advisability, or anything else but the nuisance of it, and George is no different to all the other men in the world. It is a nuisance, there is no doubt about that, but you are so very young that I should have thought it better to wait a little."

Mrs Etherington then turned the conversation into other channels, inquired whether they had any idea as to the kind of house they would have, whether they had thought of locality as yet, and whether they would have one servant or two. And then she asked Marty if she wouldn't play something. "Or sing," she added. "I am sure you sing, my dear."

"Oh, I sing a little," said Marty. "It isn't worth your listening to."

"Nonsense! I should like to know how much worth it is. I can't tell unless I have an opportunity of judging for myself. Georgie tells me that you play and sing very well. Supposing you play to me first."

So Marty sat down at the grand piano and began to play. She played very nicely, but Mrs Ethering-

ton heard in five minutes that it was no more than the ordinary schoolgirl's kind of playing.

"If I were you, Marty," she said, "I wouldn't play pieces like that. It sounds as if you brought them from school with you."

"So I did," said Marty, with a laugh.

"Ah, I thought as much. Well, you must let me pick you out a dozen or so pieces of music. Those things you have been playing you have to play so extremely well to make any effect with them. I wonder," she went on, "if I was to start keeping a school, whether I should have a success." Marty looked up astonished. "Yes, I know what you mean," said Mrs Etherington. "Somehow schools always seem to be kept by people with cut-and-dried ideas, people who never think for themselves—very polite and well-mannered, and all that sort of thing, but with no development about them. I believe myself," she went on, "that a school which would turn out girls as they will be a year after they have been in society would be a perfect boon to nineteen mothers out of twenty."

CHAPTER XV

MARRIED

EARLY in September Marty and George Etherington were married. The wedding would not perhaps have been quite so early had it not been for the fact that from the end of the first week in September, his holidays of four weeks began.

It was a very quiet wedding—not a dozen guests in all. There was a nicely-served little tea at the house of the bride's mother, with a quite amazing wedding-cake. Marty's two young sisters did the honours and Colonel Etherington bestowed his attentions exclusively upon Marty's mother. All things considered, it must be confessed that Mrs Etherington behaved beautifully.

"Good-bye, my dear boy," she said, when he came at the last moment to bid her farewell, "good-bye, my dear eldest child. I have done the best I could for you; I hope God will bless you in the choice you have made—I can't say any more, Georgie."

It was so unlike his mother to make a speech of that kind, that he felt, with a sense of shame almost, a curious feeling that she had become infected by Mrs Benyon's homely way of expressing herself. He put his arm round her, and drew her closely to him. "You have been the best and dearest of mothers to me," he said. "And you have been better and dearer

and kinder and sweeter these last few weeks than I have ever known you. I think you will find my little girl not ungrateful. Whether she is or not, darling mother, I shall always remain exactly the same to you."

"My son is my son—" began Mrs Etherington, but George cut her short without any ceremony.

"Well, you know, mother, dear, I always thought that arrant rot!" he declared.

And then Mrs Etherington, feeling that some breath of his ordinary self had come to blow away the cobwebs of unusual emotion which had woven themselves about her, gave a laugh which had something like tears in it, and a sigh which was almost big enough to choke her. "There, there!" she said, "we won't indulge in forebodings, or anything horrible. I hope you will have a lovely time on the French coast. My dear, you'll not forget that you have a mother at home—I mean in England—who will be glad to know how you are going on." Then she put up her two hands and drew his head down to her own level, kissing him very kindly and tenderly.

"Come, come!" said a voice at the door, "you have no time! You'll lose your train!"

At this moment Marty came flying out of the drawing-room and stopped to bid her mother-in-law good-bye. "Good-bye, Mrs Etherington," she said. "I can't thank you enough for all your kindness to me. I'll make it up to Georgie."

Then there was a last hug to her mother and another warning from the best man, and Marty went out of her old home Marty Benyon no longer, but Mrs George Etherington.

It is surprising how quickly, when the bride and

groom have gone, guests at a wedding betake themselves out of the house. One hears dozens of little remarks at divers weddings bearing upon this subject:

"There, it's all over but a shout!" says one.

"Now they've gone we can clear out," mutters another.

"You must want to be quiet after the excitement, dear Mrs So-and-So," purrs a third.

"So glad everything went off nicely. Now you'll be able to rest," murmurs a fourth.

As a rule, it would be more kindly if wedding guests remained a little longer. In some cases it would break the parting, and take away the first feeling of desolation which overspreads a family when it remembers that one of its circle has left it, never to come back in quite the same way again.

When the carriage had driven away, Mrs Etherington drew what the French would call her *petit vêtement* up about her shoulders. "Well, Geoffrey," she said, "we may as well be going home." If she had been a generation younger she would have put it rather differently. She would have said, "We may as well clear out of this!" As it was, she expressed her wishes in the more polite form.

"Yes, yes," said Colonel Etherington, tugging at his grey moustache, "yes, yes, dearest, we'll be toddling quietly home."

So they went into the drawing-room together.

"I am very glad that everything has gone off so satisfactorily. I am sure you must be, too," said George's mother to her hostess. "I am so glad, too, Mrs Benyon, that you did not think it necessary to weep. I do so loathe mothers who weep when their daughters marry somebody that they are thoroughly

in love with, and whom it would break their hearts to lose. The very last wedding we were at I can only describe as damp. The bride cried, and the bride's mother cried, and her sisters and several aunts! I assure you the bridegroom's mother looked most indignant. I sympathised with her."

Mrs Benyon smiled. It was a smile that was characteristic of the woman herself, not a sudden illumining of her face, but a slow, sweet expression which gradually took possession of her countenance. "It isn't our way to indulge much in tears, Mrs Etherington," she said simply. "I haven't seen my girl cry a dozen times in her life. Sometimes I think it must be a relief—undoubtedly, under certain circumstances; at a wedding I consider tears criminal."

"Well, good-bye, my dear Mrs Benyon. I hope you won't feel too done up later on."

Mrs Etherington got into her victoria, which was waiting at the door, and as the carriage turned away, she looked up at the house out of which she had just come. "There lies the grave of all my ambitions," she said.

"Come, come! don't say that," said the colonel.

"I may as well say it as think it, Geoffrey," she said, heaving a big sigh. "All things considered, I think I may flatter myself that I have behaved well to-day."

"Dearest," he said, "you have behaved nobly!"

"I'm glad you think so. I felt it all the time. All the time I kept saying to myself—'Madge Etherington, you're a brick! Madge Etherington, you are behaving splendidly! You are superb!' You think I didn't show anything that I really felt?"

"I'm sure you didn't. Anybody might have flattered themselves into believing that you were delighted with the marriage."

"Ah! And tell me, Geoffrey, what did you think of her?"

"Of the girl? I had seen her before."

"No, not the girl; the girl's mother."

"Well, what I think of the girl's mother doesn't much matter, my dear. She won't enter into our calculations. She has a very proper idea of keeping herself to herself. She won't bother us much, nor will she, unless I'm very much mistaken, trouble the young people. She made a very sensible remark to me when I was talking to her just now."

"Yes?"

"She said, 'I don't know what people in the world do. I've never troubled myself about other people's likes and dislikes; I have my own views, and I keep to them; I do what I think is right or wrong, as the case may be; other people's ideas don't trouble me.'"

"Go on," said Mrs Etherington.

"She said, 'I have told George and Marty exactly what they have got to expect from me. I am here in my house, where I have always been, and I shall be here when they want me, and glad to see them, but to be running in and out of their place like a dog in a fair, is what I don't hold with. I think young people are best left alone. If they get on well, they don't want others; if they don't get on well, they'd best fight it out by themselves, but a girl's home is a girl's home, not until she gets married, but to the end of her life—or, at least, as long as the home is kept going.' I told her," the old colonel went on, "I told

her that was very much your own idea, that you had taken very much that line with our daughter. And that reminds me, Madge, I don't think Effie has behaved well in this business—no sign, no present, no acknowledgment of the event at all. It doesn't come well from one who married to please herself. You can tell Effie, when you happen to be speaking of the subject, that I consider a slight to my eldest son is a slight to her family."

"You won't quarrel about it, Geoffrey?"

"I have never quarrelled with my children. I never mean to," said the colonel; "at the same time I won't pretend that I don't feel a slight when I get it. In this instance I feel it very deeply. I have always been everything to my children, done everything for them, sacrificed everything for them, just as you have done yourself. I consider that George had the same right to marry the girl of his choice that Effie had to marry the man of hers."

"There is a difference, dear."

"I don't know that I particularly see it," said the colonel. "But then, as you must know perfectly well, Dick Piers is the kind of young fellow that doesn't appeal to me."

"I have almost always found," said Mrs Etherington, rather severely, "that, where a girl is concerned, qualities which have nothing to do with her class, are those which most often appeal to a man. I have seen it over and over again—a glint in the eye, a turn of the chin, a toss of the head, a lilt in the voice, and your man is done for."

"I grant you, oh, I grant you that. You are perfectly right, my dear, you are perfectly right. But then you know, dearest, you always are right. I

might spare myself the trouble of telling you so often."

And then they drew up at their own door, and Mrs Etherington, with an indulgent smile, got out of the carriage.

So the great day came to an end at last. Each mother was feeling a certain amount of bereavement, but George and Marty, who were well on their way to Dover, felt only a delightful sense that they were together for always. It was essentially a case where one man's loss was another man's gain. Marriages are often so.

What a time they had, those two; not frequenting the gay watering-places very much, but moving as the spirit took them from one to another, until they had traversed the French coast from Calais to The Havre. It was a most welcome surprise to George that Marty showed not the smallest desire to mix with the gay crowds of holiday-makers. The very first night that they found themselves on French soil, she had drawn him aside from a group of people staying in the same hotel.

"Don't mix up with all those people, darling," she said. "When we get back to London there will be such a slice out of every day when we sha'n't even see each other. We shall have to know all sorts of people there; while we are over here, let's keep ourselves to ourselves and be everything to each other."

They stayed three days in this place. Then George suggested to her that they might as well make a move onwards. The girl was nothing loth; so long as she was with him, she did not care what particular town or village they might quarter themselves in.

"I think it wouldn't be a bad idea to go on if we're going to do the coast right down as far as The Havre," she said.

"Then," said George, "I'll just stop at the office, find out about the trains, and tell them to let us have our bill."

He was occupied some little time, because the place they were anxious to go to was difficult of access, and he found that it would be necessary to take a carriage for part of the road. Marty, meantime, strolled to the door and stood looking out over the wide water, which lay glinting under an early autumn sun like one vast jewel in a bed of sapphire velvet.

"Who is he?" she heard a voice say just round the doorway.

"Etherington, his name is. He's in the Colonial Office."

"And just married, you say?"

"Yes, just married."

"You don't say so! Then the girl is his wife?"

"Yes, of course."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, quite sure. I saw their wedding in the paper the other day."

"That's a pity," said the first speaker, deliberately.

"Why?" inquired the other.

"Because," replied the first speaker, "he's a swagger young chap enough, but there's something a bit common about her."

CHAPTER XVI

A LITTLE TALK

It was nearly half an hour later when George Etherington, having concluded his arrangements for the continuing of their journey, left the glass-covered box in which the mistress of the house sat, and slowly mounted the stairs to their bedroom on the first floor. As he turned the handle of the door unwonted sounds fell on his ears—Marty was crying!

He had gone upstairs in a peculiarly easy frame of mind and body; he was perfectly happy, and at peace with himself and the entire world. The thought of his sister—the one blot upon his new life—did not trouble him. He had had an excellent lunch; his monetary affairs were in perfect order, and he felt at peace with himself and all mankind; but when, as he opened the door, a realisation of the new state of things came upon him, his happy sensation of general ease at once took wings and flew away.

He stepped quickly into the room, closing the door softly behind him. Marty was lying on the bed, her face smothered in a pillow. She was sobbing and shaking as if her very heart would break.

"Good God!" ejaculated George. "What on earth has happened? Marty, my darling, what is it? You haven't bad news from home? You can't have had—I've never left the hall. Tell me!"

But it was no use bidding the girl tell him, she was quite beyond telling him or anybody else anything, and she sobbed convulsively on until the young man was almost beside himself. He tried every means that he could think of to make some impression upon her; he might as well have talked to the walls, or the floor, or the bed on which she was lying. She just sobbed on, taking no notice of his coaxings, scoldings, threats, entreaties, all of which he tried in turn. At last, for nobody can go on weeping for ever, her tears exhausted themselves, her sobs died away, and she became calm.

Then, after a little time, she roused herself from her lowly position and spoke to him. "Is that you, George?" she said. "I wish you hadn't come. I should have got over it just as well by myself."

"Over what?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing, nothing; it's nothing at all. I—I—don't feel very well."

"You don't feel well? Why, I shouldn't think you did! If I were to cry like that I should be laid up for a month. Do you often do it?" He was sitting on the bed opposite her, holding her fast so that there was no possible escape. She rested her head against his shoulder, and closed her eyes. "Tell me," he said, "do you often indulge in this sort of thing?"

"No; you know I don't. I never did it in my life before!" she exclaimed.

"What made you do it now?"

"Oh, don't ask me! Don't talk about it! It was nothing. I am a fool!"

"A fool, are you? H'm, I didn't know. It's a bit of new information. You have managed to hide it uncommonly well all this time. You know if you

didn't enlighten me, I might have gone on to the end without finding it out."

"Oh, George, don't be silly!" Marty exclaimed.

"Silly? Well, if you are a fool, I must try and bring myself down to your level and make myself a match for you," he retorted.

"You'll never make yourself a match for me. I shall never be a match for you. I wish I hadn't married you. I wish I hadn't sacrificed you!"

"Eh? What? You wish you hadn't married me! You don't mean that?"

"Mean it? Oh, don't I mean it! Every word of it, Georgie, every word of it. And you'll come to see it, too, in the end."

"Now what on earth, I'd like to know, has put this rot into your head? Half an hour ago, when I went to ask for the bill and arrange for getting to the other place, you were as gay as a bird; you had never had such an idea as this in your mind. Who's been saying anything to you?"

"Nobody."

"You are sure?"

"Oh, yes, quite sure. I haven't spoken to a soul."

"Had any letters?"

"No."

"Then what's the meaning of it? Look here, I am your husband, I'm not going to have things happen in your life that you don't share with me; I won't stand it for a minute. What's happened?"

"Nothing."

"That won't wash. Something happened after I left you. What was it?"

"Nothing."

"Somebody must have spoken to you. You saw somebody you knew?"

"I didn't. I didn't see anybody. I—I—I came up here and I got thinking."

"No, that won't do; it won't wash. It's no use trying it on, Marty; you had better make a clean breast of it and tell me the truth, because I'm going to know."

"Have you made up your mind to that?"

"I have. I've got very definite ideas about husbands and wives leading one life; I've begun as I mean to go on. I tell you everything—everything that comes into my thoughts. I expect you to do the same by me."

"I'll tell you when we get to Tourbeville," said Marty, at last, finding herself driven into a corner.

"You are sure?"

"Oh, yes, I'll tell you. It was very stupid of me."

"Why can't you tell me now?"

"Because I don't choose to. I'll tell you as soon as we get to Tourbeville, I promise you."

"Somebody spoke to you, Marty," he insisted.

"Not a soul, not even the chambermaid. You are quite mistaken. I was a fool to cry—I acknowledge it. You seem to think it was funny."

"There's nothing funny in being a fool, not if you really are one; but there's something very funny in the idea of *your* being a fool, you, with the sharpest wits of anybody I ever knew in my life! However, you'll tell me?"

"Oh, I'll tell you. I'm sorry I made a spectacle of myself. I suppose I look horrid."

She looked at him so piteously that all his sternness melted, and a great flood of tenderness took its

place. "My dear, precious little love," he said, "you don't think that I would bully you for bullying's sake? It was only when I found you positively convulsed with grief, and I couldn't get you to speak, that I got savage—not against you, my precious girl, not against you."

It was just five o'clock when they started on their three hours' drive to Tourbeville. It was a lovely drive, most of the time within sight of the sea; and Marty was as gay as a bird. All tell-tale stains had disappeared from her face; nobody would have believed that she had ever cried in her life.

It was not until they had discussed an excellent dinner, and had taken a little stroll on a diminutive promenade in the cool of the evening, that George Etherington made any attempt to find out the cause of Marty's tears during the afternoon.

"I would rather you would let me off telling you," she said.

"I won't do that."

"Because it was only my own foolishness, you know. I needn't have made such a fuss, I needn't have cried at all. I—I—"

"Well, you had better tell me what happened, and then I'll give you my opinion as to whether you were foolish or not."

She saw that there was no getting out of it, that he was determined to know, and so, with many blushes and stammerings, she told him all the conversation that she had overheard.

George Etherington's face grew as dark as night. "Who were they?" he asked.

"I haven't the least idea."

"You didn't look to see?"

"No, I didn't. I was glad to get away into my bedroom and hide myself."

"But why? You had a right to know."

"Yes, I daresay I had. All the same—"

"All the same, my dear child, you were very foolish. People who don't know us have a right to hold what opinion they like; it isn't kind, it isn't well-bred to express it; and I don't suppose that these people knew that you were within earshot. Why should they want to hurt or offend you? Everybody can't look at everybody else with the same eyes—the world couldn't go on if they did. It was foolish; it was more foolish than I thought."

"I don't think," said Marty, in a low voice, "that it was so foolish, because, you see, George, I knew it was true."

In vain did he argue, expostulate, scold, coax and threaten by turns; over and over again she came back to her original statement—"But it was true. I knew it was true. It might be unkind, but it wasn't a lie—it was true!" until the young husband was almost beside himself.

"I quite thought that was a bride and groom who arrived a day or two ago from Calais," said one visitor in the little hall to another.

"Oh, yes, unmistakably, bride and groom. Her wedding ring is quite new."

"Well, they were quarrelling fearfully last night. I heard them."

"Nonsense!"

"Oh, they were. They were arguing for hours about something!"

"They seem the best of friends this morning," said the other.

"Do they? Oh, you see, young people fall out and make it up again so easily. They are not like us. Oh, here they come!"

Certainly the two ladies might be forgiven for taking an interest in the young couple; George, tall and well set up, with clever, clean-shaven face, and his cool, tweed clothes; Marty, in the plainest frock that her wardrobe contained, a dark blue serge, very simply made, with a hat of rough, loose straw trimmed with cornflowers and a bunch of poppies. They were laughing and talking gaily together; and as they came opposite to the two ladies, Marty stopped to caress a great Persian tabby cat which had walked majestically out of the house. "Oh, Georgie!" she cried, "what a lovely cat! Oh, you darling!" She lifted him up and held him for George to see. "See, what a chest! What amber eyes! What great broad pats! Oh, isn't he lovely? I think you must buy me a cat when we get home. It would be easier to manage in a flat than a dog."

Then they strolled on again, leaving the two ladies looking after them.

"So they live in a flat," said one to the other.

"They sounded all right, didn't they?"

"Yes, they did indeed."

Something made Marty look back. "George," she said suddenly, "is it common to take an interest in cats?"

"Good gracious no, child! What *are* you talking about?"

"I don't know. They stared at us so. They stare at me every time I come near them."

"Who?"

"Those two old ladies."

"Let them stare."

"I'm sure my frock," said Marty, looking down at it, "is simple enough, isn't it?—a little blue serge that anybody might wear—and they stare at me as if—as if I was an idiot or something."

"Nonsense! You are getting morbid on the subject, my dear child," he said, drawing her into an arbour where they were well out of sight of all eyes, and holding her so that he could look straight down into her troubled face, "my dear child, if there's a common thing in the world it's worrying about the opinion of others. Do you know the reason why I fell in love with you?"

"No."

"Because you struck me as a girl who lived her life in her own way, who did not trouble about the opinions of others, who did a thing because she thought it right, who would love me because she chose to, hate me because she wasn't going to love me. You struck me as having an original mind; that was what first fetched me in you. Marty," he said, "if that first night when we met at that blessed ball you had worried about your dress, troubled about your manners, or fidgeted about other people's opinions, I should never have come to Rosediamond Road, and you would not be here at this minute."

CHAPTER XVII

SOMETHING ON HER MIND

I AM bound to say that Marty, once set on the watch for expressions of opinion anent her own personal shortcomings, found plenty of food for reflection. They made no friends, for they moved on every two or three days, but everywhere Marty ran the gauntlet, as it were, of social approval or disapproval, whichever way you like to put it. They say if you look for trouble you are sure to find it, and Marty, with every day that went over her head, saw some small signs of disapproval in those among whom she was thrown. It was only natural that she should. These things are merely a matter of temperament, and frequently of a temperament that is more or less fleeting. Take your own self, sir or madam. You set out from your house to go to some social function, some gathering of your friends, and everything has been smooth and easy for you during the whole day. You have eaten well, you are conscious of having worked well, or done a good turn to somebody, or having improved your mind, or of good in some shape or form; your gown is perhaps a new one, and it fits, and is comfortable; your ornaments are handsome, or the gift of dear friends; your body is healthy and your mind at ease; do you not find under such circumstances that the party is an un-

usually pleasant one? Does not everybody seem to be full and flowing over with the milk of human kindness? Of course they do.

But take the other side of the picture. You have had perhaps a month's invitation to a party at a great London hotel; you perhaps have not very long been back from your holiday, you are scarcely, as yet, into the ways of the world again, so much so that your toilet is something of a bore; you almost wish that you hadn't accepted the invitation. However, with what might be called a scramble, and a sense of having done your duty by your neighbour, you betake yourself to the scene of festivity. Possibly it is a very good party, and you meet very nice people, and, after all, you are able to enjoy yourself; but, on the other hand, it is possible that when you arrive you find no hostess to receive you, although the time is an hour after that for which you were bidden. A few people are straggled about the room, nobody feels quite at home, everybody is to a certain extent sore and indignant that a great dinner has been given to which each individually feels they had a right to be asked; some would not have attended the party had they known it was a reception after a banquet, others do not feel this; but the party is dull, the men —being men of business habits—sit for an hour and a half after the ladies have risen; the music is deafening and oft recurrent, and the Cape of Good Hope which lies far ahead takes the form of supper. So far *not* so good. Having arrived in an unhinged frame of mind, you may find, fair reader—or noble reader, as the case may be—you may find the truth of the old saying, "All is not gold that glitters"; you may feel that social life is a mistake, and that

you yourself are a fool; you may feel fifty hard things, but all those fifty are as nothing when they are topped by the last great fact—that there is no supper! True, on a small side table there are tea and coffee, long gone cold, some plates with spots of pink-and-white blancmange upon them, and a few little cakes. There is not only no supper, but there is not a drink to be had for love or money. Now, gentle reader, under such circumstances as these, will you take away with you an impression that everybody loves you, that your host and hostess have valued you, that you are an item of weight in the social scale? I think not. You will be ready for any slight, you will be ready to believe any evil rumour that comes your way. If somebody tells you that your nearest and dearest friend had declared the day before—only the day before—that you were a poisoner and a forger, you do not dismiss the idea as one too preposterous to entertain; on the contrary, you will scarcely be human if you do not see at least fifty straws in the stream of your friendship, showing you exactly the flow of the water. So you will understand that this digression has something to do with Marty, and you will be able to realise that Marty, during that honeymoon pilgrimage, saw over and over again marks of disapproval in those around her; indeed, poor child, she saw more marks of disapproval than of the opposite quality.

After her first outbreak of tears she never again gave way before her husband; in fact, after that one piteous question—"Is it common to take an interest in cats?" she never again alluded to the subject, and George Etherington, man like, believed that the incident had passed out of her mind. Certainly if love

could have blotted out the small unpleasantness, Marty would never have given the incident or its cause another thought. But with some natures repression usually means growth—undergrowth—and the uncertainty of herself grew and grew until, unsuspected, it attained to proportions that were simply gigantic.

So their honeymoon pilgrimage came to an end, and they went back to London.

It was then the middle of October. It was a lovely clear autumn, fine and warm and altogether delightful. According to an old promise, they put up at Rosediamond Road during the time that they were arranging their flat and getting it ready for occupation. They had taken a domicile high up above the street, near to Victoria, where it was quiet and light and airy. It was not in Victoria Street itself. Its rooms were large and comfortable, its entry was smart and delightful, its price was very reasonable considering its proximity to the Stores, on which Marty had pinned her faith, and the sole disadvantage seemed to be the many steps which must be mounted ere the home was attained. George called it "The Eyrie," and "The Watch Tower," and other names of the kind, but it was the kind of flat that would assuredly make a delightful home.

For some reason unknown to George, Marty was not very willing that he should seal the fate of the bargain. "Don't sign it to-day — don't make up your mind quite, Georgie," she said hesitatingly, when they had been home nearly a week.

"But if we don't we may lose it. Remember we are not the only people who want to take a flat.

We shall get nothing cheaper or more commodious."

"I wasn't thinking of the cheapness, or the commodiousness," said Marty. "I—I—wish you wouldn't take it to-day."

"I'm very sorry. I promised to go in after lunch and speak to the people about it."

"Wait till to-morrow," said Marty; "wait until to-morrow. I have a particular reason for it."

She had her way, as a matter of course, and presently George went off to his office with the air of quite an old married man. Marty spent the morning in her bedroom arranging her belongings with great care. That day she was to lunch with her mother-in-law. She dressed herself carefully in her simplest frock, the unoffending blue serge in which she felt her character and disposition were safest. She just looked in on her mother, who was having lunch, as she passed.

"My dear, you *have* got a plain little gown on," said Mrs Benyon. "Won't Mrs Etherington be a little offended at your wearing such a very ordinary frock?"

"I don't think so, mother, dear," said Marty. "But I'm late, darling. I just looked in to say good-bye."

She kissed her lightly and went away without another word. She had no longer any sensation of nervousness in going to the house of George's people, but as she drew near the door, two young ladies came out, passing her on the doorstep. From the quick, comprehensive glance that they bestowed upon her, she guessed that they were friends of Mrs Piers. A curious feeling of pride took possession of her, a something which said within her that either of these

damsels would have loved to be in her present shoes. She was not, as a matter of fact, very far wrong in her estimate, for although they would not have owned it to each other, or even to themselves, the two girls were sisters who would either of them have cheerfully consented to become Mrs Etherington's daughter-in-law.

The neat parlour-maid showed Marty at once into the drawing-room. "Ah, my dear," said Mrs Etherington, "you are punctual, you are to the very minute! How are you?"

She took Marty's almost unwilling hand, and kissed her just as nicely as any mother-in-law could be expected to do. "Have you taken your flat yet?" she asked.

"No, not yet, Mrs Etherington."

"I thought you were so pleased with it?"

"Yes, we were. George was very pleased with it!"

"And don't you like it?"

"Yes, I like it too. It's a charming flat. George thinks it is a bargain."

"My dear, there's no doubt about it. To get a flat in that situation—even if it is rather high up—with commodious rooms and an uninterrupted view at the back, for that price, is absolutely absurd. You tell George to go and get it fixed up, or somebody will come along and offer ten pounds a year more rent, and then where will you be?"

"And then," said Marty, dreamily, "then where shall I be?" She roused herself with an effort, perhaps called back to a realisation of every-day life by the astonished look on her mother-in-law's face. "I think Georgie is going to take it to-morrow," she said,

speaking in a brisker tone. "I—I don't think there's any fear of our losing it, because it's been empty for six months."

"Oh! Did you find out why the last people left?"

"Yes. They wanted a larger flat, and it was necessary to do something to the drainage; and they've put in the electric light, too."

"Electric light as well as all the other advantages!" cried Mrs Etherington.

"Yes, there's electric light, and all the walls have been stripped of their paper, and the paint has been done over in a kind of dun colour, so that the new tenants can have what decorations they like. But somehow I—I don't think there's any hurry. Anyway, George was going to-morrow to see about it. It doesn't do to look too eager, you know."

"What a wise little head it is!" said Mrs Etherington, indulgently. "Now come in to lunch, my dear. Oh, yes, the colonel's at home; he very often does go out and lunch at his club, but he stayed at home especially for you."

A couple of hours later Marty bade the Etheringtons adieu.

"She's a dear little girl," said the colonel. "I don't wonder the boy is so taken up with her as he is."

"Yes, she is," said his wife, absently. "She gives me the idea of having something on her mind."

"How do you mean on her mind?"

"I don't know. When she first came here she was quite different to what she is now. She's not herself to-day—she's brooding over something."

CHAPTER XVIII

GONE!

It was nearly seven o'clock when George Etherington arrived at Rosediamond Road that evening. There are times, you know, when men in Government offices do a certain amount of work, and have to keep hours that are almost long enough to strike over. Having been away up so long, George Etherington found himself expected to take share in setting free those who had been kept in durance by his long holiday. Not that he grumbled; he took it as a matter of course, for George was a good-natured young man, and never grudged giving what he called his "whack" to the office or to the service of his fellows.

He turned into the little drawing-room. "Hullo, Mater," he said, "where's Marty?"

Mrs Benyon, who was reading a paper by the window, looked up. "Marty? Didn't she come to meet you? Oh, I quite thought she did. She went out; she went to lunch with your mother, you know."

"Ah, then I'll go round and fetch her."

"No, no. She came in about a little after three, and she stayed upstairs, and then she had a cup of tea with me and she went out. I thought she was gone to meet you."

"No, she didn't come to meet me. However, I

daresay she'll be in in a few minutes. Perhaps she's gone to see that Amabel."

"Ah," said Mrs Benyon, "very likely she has. You know, my dear boy, when girls get married they love to go round and talk things over with their dearest friends, and Amabel has always been Marty's dearest friend."

"Oh, she's a nice girl," said George, "she's a nice girl; I don't grudge it. If she hadn't been, I don't think Marty would have cared about her."

He stayed for ten minutes or so talking to his mother-in-law, then he said he was going to change his coat, and with that he left the room, and Mrs Benyon went on with her reading.

The hands of the clock went slowly round until the half-hour chimed with two tiny strokes. Then Sarah came and asked if they should wait for Mrs Etherington.

"Isn't Mrs Etherington in?" asked Mrs Benyon.

"No, ma'am."

"Are you sure?"

"I am quite sure, ma'am. She had her key, you know. I'll go up to her room and make sure," said Sarah; "but I've been looking out for her."

She turned and went up the stairs. Half-way up she met George Etherington. "Is Mrs Etherington in, sir?" she asked.

"No, I haven't seen her."

"I thought not. Mistress would have me come up and see if she was in your bedroom; but I knew she wasn't there, for I hadn't seen her go up," said Sarah, and turned herself and went down again. "Mrs Etherington isn't in, ma'am," she announced at the drawing-room door.

"Well, you had better wait a few minutes, Sarah. George, do you think Marty is still at Amabel's?"

"I'll go round and see," said he, and as soon as the words were spoken he turned, and, taking his hat, went out of the house.

I have said that Amabel Leigh lived in the next street, so that it did not take George Etherington very long to reach her door. The servant told him that Mrs Etherington was not there; indeed, that she had not been there that day.

Amabel heard his voice and came out. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"We can't find Marty," he said. "I think she's eloped."

"Oh, nonsense! She was going to lunch with your mother."

"I know she was; but she went home after that, and she's gone, she's cleared! I tell you it's a regular tragedy in high life! Oh, you may laugh, but I don't know where to look for her."

The girl laughed aloud. "Well, that is funny," she said. "It only shows, Mr Etherington, that none of us ought to be too cocky. Depend upon it, Marty's given you the slip and gone off with another charmer!"

"Ah, that's it! Depend upon it you are right. Well, I'm sorry to have troubled you to-night."

He still felt no uneasiness. He went round to his own house just in time to see his father and mother getting into a cab.

"Hullo! Off out to dinner?" he asked,

"Yes, dear," Mrs Etherington replied.

"Hope you'll enjoy yourselves."

Some instinct made him say nothing about Marty,

but ere the servant closed the door he turned and said, "Is anyone at home, Harcourt?"

"No, sir, everyone out."

"Ah, that's all right. Thanks."

Then he went back to Rosediamond Road. "Mater," he said, "I've been to the Leighs and I've been home. She's not there."

"I can't make it out," said Mrs Etherington.

"I can't make it out either. Do you think she's gone up to meet me and got hurt?"

"I don't know. What had we better do? If she had been hurt she would have been sent home."

"She might be unconscious. So far as I know she had nothing about her to tell who she was or where she came from. I only ordered her cards to-day."

For a moment Mrs Benyon stood stock-still. "George," she said at last, in a shaking voice, "I want to say something, and I don't want to—to—hurt your feelings or to offend you."

"Go on, Mater," he said.

"You—you won't—?"

"No, I sha'n't. Now go on, please. Out with it."

"Was all right between you and Marty?" she asked anxiously.

"Right? My God! yes; right as a trivet. It's nothing to do with me, this; it's nothing to do with Marty. Something's happened to her. She's—she's got trapped, or she's got hurt. The question is—what are we going to do?"

"The best thing we can do," said Mrs Benyon, "is to go up to St George's Hospital and inquire there; failing that, go to the police-station, and failing that —failing that, George—I don't know, I don't know!

Nothing of this kind ever came into my life before. I've read of people who disappeared and never were heard of again, but I never thought—I never knew anybody that it really happened to. It's like reading something out of a newspaper. I have often thought that it must be too strange to have those out-of-the-way things happen. It's come home to me at last."

"Oh, don't say that! It might happen to anybody —to you, or to me, or to anybody else. We won't give up hope. Come, Mater, don't give way. You must have a stiff brandy-and-soda. I won't let you give way and unnerve yourself. You may want all the strength you have. May I tell Sarah to bring up the dinner? And do try and choke something down, because you got no lunch, I know, and if anything's happened we shall want all the strength we've got to meet it."

"Oh, my dear boy!" said Mrs Benyon, "oh, my dear boy, you don't deserve this—you—"

"Now don't say that. You don't know that there's anything to deserve or not to deserve. It may be a mere accident."

By dint of judicious coaxings and threatenings and suggestions of future need he persuaded Mrs Benyon to make a sort of a meal; for himself, he choked down half a dozen mouthfuls, and then he went out and whistled for a cab. In a few minutes Mrs Benyon was ready, and together they drove up to the hospital.

There was no news. No accident to a young lady of good position had been received that day, nobody was there in any way answering to Marty's description. Then they drove to several police-stations,

and to one or two more hospitals. They met with no better success; in short, they could find no trace or news of Marty.

When the last hope was crushed, and they had gone down the broad hospital steps into the street, Mrs Benyon looked at her son-in-law with haggard and wild eyes, saying, "What are we going to do, George? We can't go scouring this great city of London saying, 'Have you seen a young lady? She's young, and she wears a wedding ring.' Oh, George, what are we going to do? I feel there's something to be done, if we only knew how to do it."

"Mater," he said, "we can't go about the streets all night. We shall only wear ourselves out for nothing. We had better go home and go to bed, and to-morrow morning we had better start out again and do as we've done to-night. I'll go to a detective, one of those private fellows that will trace out anything; that's the best thing to do."

"I believe you are right. Then let us take a cab. I'm so tired," she said.

"I'm sure you are, Mater. Come, here's a decent-looking horse. Hi!"

The cab drove up to the kerb, and George Etherington assisted Marty's mother into it, gave the address to the cabman, got in, and closed the door. "There, that's better," he said, "isn't it?"

"It *is* better," she replied. After a minute or so she added, "You can smoke if you like."

"I don't want to smoke, thanks."

"I'm sure you are dying for a smoke."

"I feel as if I should never want to smoke a cigarette again, Mater," he replied. "I want a brandy-

and-soda more than anything else, and so do you for that matter."

It was a long drive, but they got home at last. Mrs Benyon went heavily and dejectedly into the house. Sarah, with a white and anxious face, was awaiting her.

"Have you got any news, ma'am?" she asked.

"Not a word, Sarah; not a trace. It's as if she had been swallowed up. I can't make it out. It isn't like Miss Marty to do anything of this kind."

"No, indeed, ma'am. She so bright and happy, and such an angelic disposition. Do you think, ma'am, there's anything—anything wrong between them?"

"No. I asked him the question straight. I put it to him quite plainly, Sarah. He's heart-broken. He's had no dinner, Sarah—not half a dozen mouthfuls. He made me eat, but I saw it choked him. Get a brandy-and-soda out, will you? That's the best thing that we can do for him."

"And for you, ma'am," said Sarah, indignantly, "you want a cup of tea most of anything else. If you have a dash of brandy in it, well, so much the better. Whatever it is that's taken Miss Marty away it isn't you, and I think it's you that wants looking to more than Mr Etherington."

"Nobody could have looked after one more than he did me. If he had been my son, Sarah, twenty times over, he couldn't have been kinder and sweeter and more considerate to me. I never was one to look after myself, Sarah, but I *should* like a cup of tea."

"And you shall both have what you want, ma'am You have looked after each other, and I'll look after both of you."

She bustled away, returning presently with a tray

on which were both tea and brandy-and-soda. She served the one to Mrs Benyon and poured out the other for Marty's husband. And just then a postman's knock sounded on the door, and she went out to fetch the letters.

"All but one for you, ma'am," she said, handing a letter to George Etherington.

"Oh, my God!" he exclaimed, as his eyes fell upon the handwriting.

"What is it?" called out Mrs Benyon, sharply.

"It's a letter from Marty," he replied.

CHAPTER XIX

MARTY'S LETTER

"My dearest, darling George,"—said Marty in the letter,—"I asked you to-day not to sign the agreement for the flat that we had decided on. My reason for doing so is because I never intend to live in it. I have not taken this step without serious thought, Georgie. We have made a mistake, you and I. I was not the wife for you, although nobody will ever love you as I have done and do at this moment. If I had seen before our wedding day what I so clearly see now—that you have practically ruined yourself by marrying a girl who is not your equal—I would have broken off everything, because I loved you more than myself. As it is, we have taken the foolish step, but I am not going to let you suffer because of that. Very few people know that you are married. You must go home and forget that Marty was ever a part of your life. You will feel bad for a little while, I know, but after a time, when you get used to being without me, you will realise as fully as I do what a huge mistake we have made. You will look for me, I daresay, and poor mother will do the same, but I don't think you will ever find me; and if you do, it will make no difference. I shall not feel other than I do now. Good-bye, my dear, dear, kind, loving Georgie. Comfort poor mother as best you can. Tell her,

although I shall be far away, I will do nothing that she would disapprove of, any more than I did when I was with her.—Your heart-broken little clog,

"MARTY."

George Etherington had begun by reading aloud, but his voice failed him when he had read a few lines, and when he had reached the end the paper fluttered away and lay neglected on the floor. He turned away and hid his face from his mother-in-law, resting his arms on the mantel-shelf.

"What is it? What does it all mean?" cried Mrs Benyon in trembling tones. She possessed herself of the letter, and, holding it under the light, read it from beginning to end. "'Your heart-broken little clog, Marty.' What does she mean? Had you ever told her she was a clog upon you?"

"*I!*" he exclaimed, "I, Mater? You must know perfectly well that I absolutely worship the very ground that she walks on. She's got an idea into her head."

"But what?" cried Mrs Benyon.

"Oh, something she heard somebody say when we were at one of those damned French hotels."

"What did they say?"

"I'm not going to tell you, Mater. It was bad enough at the time. I told her there was nothing in it; I thought I had satisfied her, I thought she had forgotten all about it. It seems she hadn't. People don't realise when they say beastly, unkind, cruel, unjust things, they don't realise how long they'll stick in the minds of those who hear them, nor how they may wreck the happiness of those who never did them, or wished to do them, an ill turn."

Mrs Benyon was still reading poor Marty's letter. She looked up with wild eyes. "George," she said, "is that the exact truth?"

"The exact truth, Mater!"

"Why didn't you convince my poor little girl that she was wrong? If she was good enough for you, good enough for your father and mother to accept, what had outside people to do with it?"

"I don't know. I didn't hear what was said. I told Marty it was all rot. I thought that she was satisfied and had forgotten all about it. Mater," he went on, "I'd have cut my right hand off rather than have let her go." And then his fortitude gave way, and he hid his face in his hands, sobbing aloud.

For a moment Mrs Benyon stood appalled. She had known George Etherington under sunny circumstances; she had always seen him gay, *débonnaire*, a little careless. To her he had always been as a gilded youth; and then to see him standing there, huddled up against the chimney-shelf in an agony of grief—oh, it was terrible! She almost forgot her own sorrow in the contemplation of his.

At last she moved a step nearer to him and put her hand on his shoulder. "My dear boy," she said, "you have nothing to reproach yourself with. Don't lose control of yourself. To-morrow morning, as soon as it is daylight—I mean as soon as the offices are open—go off to one of those inquiry people who ferret out everything about everybody. Put the matter into his hands."

"Meantime," said he, "she has got such a start."

"Well, she has; at the same time that is not quite everything. I mean a few hours' start won't be an insurmountable difficulty to them. I can't imagine

where the child has gone; so far as I can tell, she has taken nothing with her."

"Who saw her go?"

"Oh, Sarah was the last who saw her. She said she was just as usual. She wore her blue serge dress, and the blue hat that went with it, and that grey coat—the rough grey coat, you know, that she travelled home in."

"I know," said George."

"It's a dress that she goes out in continually since the weather turned so chill," said Mrs Benyon. "There was nothing to make Sarah suspect that she was going to run away."

"You mean that she had no luggage with her of any kind whatever?"

"My dear boy, if Marty had had luggage Sarah would have been on the alert in a moment."

"Of course."

"What is much more important," said Mrs Benyon, "is to know what money she had with her."

"Oh, she had a lot of money. I gave her twenty pounds the same day we were married. I didn't know what she had, and I told her she had better have it by her in case she wanted it."

"And I gave her twenty pounds," said Mrs Benyon. "I think it is so dreadful for a girl to be beholden to a newly-married husband for every farthing till they get used to each other."

"She told me you had given her some money."

"The question is—how much of it did she spend?"

"I don't think she spent a farthing, Mater. She never went anywhere without me, and I paid for everything that she wanted. So she had forty pounds in her pocket."

"Forty pounds." At this point Mrs Benyon staggered back and sat down in a very uncertain fashion.

"Mater," said George, "you are utterly overdone. and I, like the selfish beast that I am, have been thinking about myself more than you." He went hastily to the sideboard and mixed her a brandy-and-soda. "Drink this, dear," he said; "it's good for you. It's no use letting ourselves go; we must keep up our strength, because we must keep going until we find her. Mater, dear, she says in that—that—that thing there," pointing to the letter, "that I am to go back home and forget. Who that has known Marty could ever forget? It's sheer rot!"

"But then, you see, my poor little girl doesn't know herself. She doesn't know how perfect she is," said Mrs Benyon.

"And, Mater, dear, if you'll let me, I'll stop here."

"My poor George!" said Mrs Benyon.

"I knew you would say that. You are awfully good. I'll—yes, I'll stay here. And I think we won't tell anybody just yet. What do you say, Mater?"

"I wouldn't tell a soul," said Mrs Benyon. "Just keep out of sight. They'll all think—your people and the rest—they'll all think that you are busy getting your flat ready. Don't you let on a word, Georgie; there's nothing to be gained by it—I always did hate a blab—and you and I will take care of each other until she comes back again. We must take Sarah into our confidence, because, you see, she knows; and then you go in the morning, Georgie, when you have had a good breakfast—because it's no use working on an empty stomach—you'll go to—to

—Oh, I don't know what that man's name is—Smart, or Cute, or something—and you'll tell him all about it, and we shall get her back before we know we've lost her almost. And you won't be unkind to her when you get her back, Georgie?"

"Me?" said he, with a fine disregard of grammar. "Me? Oh, Mater!"

"Well, then, dear boy, you go off to bed, and I'll do the same. We'll just get a good night's rest," she went on, making a brave effort to keep herself cheerful and reasonable, "and then, in the morning, after a good breakfast, we shall be fit to face the worst."

"And you don't think, Mater," said George Etherington, "you don't—think—that—Marty—would—would do anything?"

"Do anything!" echoed Mrs Benyon.

"I mean, do away with herself."

"I hope not—I think not. I believe not. Oh, George, my dear boy, don't let us think of a possibility so terrible! Why should we look at the dark side? After all, there's a bright side, why should we look at the dark? No, George, I won't do it. I believe my poor little girl is moved by the best and most honest motives. She was always honest, but she was sensitive. All this has preyed on her mind; it's made her see things with a squint, so to speak. But she's a good girl, she'd never do anything wicked. Some people might think it wicked for a girl to go away and leave her husband and her mother as she's done, but she hasn't looked at it in that light. There's no wickedness in Marty."

Eventually Mrs Benyon and George Etherington went to bed. If I were to say that they went to

sleep I should be no true chronicler. Mrs Benyon lay awake all through the night wondering what could have induced her bright and bonny Marty to take a step so disastrous and so unnecessary. And George—well, he was younger, and the young feel things differently to those who have got past the meridian of life. George got into his bed and wept like a child. Tears, you know, always bring their own relief, and when he had cried until he could cry no more, merciful sleep overtook him, and he forgot his troubles for a little time.

And Marty, out on the wide sea, enduring all the horrors of an unusually bad passage, sent up prayer after prayer for those she had left behind, and almost wished that she had been less heroic and a little more selfish.

CHAPTER XX

THE LONELY FURROW

HAVING once put her hand to the plough, and shut the door of her mother's house behind her, Marty was not one to turn back. She had laid her plans carefully enough. A few days previously she had gone to a respectable trunk-maker's and had bought for herself a not very large travelling trunk. This she had marked with the initials "E. J." She had purchased for herself a very modest and cheap outfit, consisting of sufficient undergarments for practical purposes, of the plainest, and I may say the cheapest, description; handkerchiefs with a ready-made initial "E"; a modest little black gown which she bought at a famous establishment for providing ladies with habiliments cut in the latest fashion at slop-shop prices, and but one little piece of finery in the shape of a silk blouse. Even that she bought cheaply, because it was slightly faded in one or two places.

It would surprise you if I were to say how small a hole she made in her forty pounds. Certain it is that that same evening a little lady left Victoria by the Continental train, and she was a little lady who bore very small resemblance to the Marty whom we have been accustomed to see. She was dressed in black, with a little black felt hat, and wore her hair done low on the nape of her neck. She wore a white lace

veil—not a very thick one, or particularly disguising. Her box was new, and bore the initials "E. J."

She took her ticket to Paris; she bought herself a book from the basket of one of the boys. It was only a sixpenny edition of a popular novel, but Marty, as she marched along the platform, with her head well in the air, her book clasped to her side, was the last person that anybody would suspect of being a bride newly run away from her husband.

She travelled second class. She spoke to nobody on the way down, and nobody spoke to her. Arrived at Newhaven, she went straight on board the boat, meeting the inevitable "First class to the right! Second class to the left!" She turned her way to the left with a resolution which meant that however disagreeable the crossing might be, she would save the few shillings that made the difference between the two. The stewardess spoke to her civilly, recommending a certain berth, and inquiring if she was a good sailor. Marty replied that she had never been sick in her life, but she took the berth which the woman pointed out, and asked if it would be possible for her to have something in the shape of supper.

"If you are good sailor enough to go up in the saloon, madam," said the stewardess, "there you will find an excellent supper; but unless you are a good sailor I shouldn't recommend you to do that, as we are starting in extra good time to-night."

"How is that?" asked Marty.

"So few passengers, madam."

"How do you account for that?" said Marty, sitting on the edge of her berth and slowly taking off her gloves.

"Well, madam, the summer rush is over, and the winter one hasn't begun. It's just between seasons. There are more coming back than going across, and will be for the next month."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Marty, carelessly. "I wonder whether I'd better have supper now, or when I get to Dieppe."

"You get a very good supper at Dieppe, you know, madam. Supposing I get you a sandwich and a whisky-and-soda—?"

"Not a whisky-and-soda," said Marty.

"Well, a glass of beer, then? Though I wouldn't recommend beer unless you are a very good sailor."

"Oh, not beer!" said Marty.

"Whisky-and-soda is the most wholesome," said the stewardess.

"Well, then, whisky-and-soda—not very strong."

"Ham sandwich or beef?" inquired the stewardess.

"I should think ham would be the best, wouldn't it? Only rather thirsty. Which you like, stewardess—something to eat."

"Very well, madam."

She bustled away, leaving Marty sitting on the edge of her berth—wondering—wondering what they were doing at home, whether they had found out, whether George was distractedly hunting round hospitals, railway stations, and police-stations, and other such gruesome places. She wondered whether he was angry, or only sorry, and she—"I beg your pardon, stewardess! I was thinking. I think I'm a little sleepy," she said. "Oh, you've got my supper! That's very nice of you. Yes, it looks very good. I don't know how I shall get the whisky down, but still—"

"They don't give you much whisky for one portion, madam, on these boats," said the stewardess. "When you come to deluge it with soda water—"

"Well, deluge it to the very top," said Marty, rather pitifully.

In spite of that the spirit brought the tears to her eyes, but she ate the two sandwiches and contrived to drink a little of the nauseous beverage, which had the effect of making her sleepy; and after lying down she knew no more until the stewardess roused her with a tap on the shoulder, telling her they were just passing into Dieppe Harbour.

It all looked dark and gruesome enough to the girl who had set out from her home-nest and from the shelter of her home affections to face the hard world alone. Fortunately she was healthily hungry, and having taken her place in the train she went back to the buffet, where she made quite an excellent meal, drinking down a cup of delicious chocolate and making short work of a good plate of chicken and tongue. It was not until she got into the train, and indeed until she was near to Paris itself, and it was already broad daylight, that she opened her purse—a perfectly plain, silver-mounted purse which she had bought for herself just before her marriage—and took from it a small piece of folded paper. It was a scrap cut from a French newspaper, and it told how at a certain convent, nineteen miles from Paris, ladies were taken as *pensionnaires* at the price of four francs a day; it added that there were lovely gardens, a large convent, good nourishment, and that applications were to be made to the Reverend Mother Superior.

Marty read it twice, then folded the paper and put it back into her purse. So that was her destination.

She looked very young—painfully young—and very weary as she sat in the cold morning light. She was very careful, though. She made a little toilet before she reached Paris, and adjusted her veil with the utmost care by the aid of the toilet-glass in the little lavatory attached to the carriage; then, having washed her hands, she sat down in her place again and put on her gloves.

It was a simple matter to pass the *douane*, for the officials knew at a glance that she was not the kind of person to be carrying contraband goods. Then she was free to face the world. When she had engaged a cab, and seen her luggage hoisted on to the top of it, she directed the man to drive to a modest hotel of which she, personally, knew nothing, for she had never been in Paris in her life before, but which she had seen highly recommended as a quiet place to which a lady could go alone.

"Can I stop here for the night?" she inquired.

She was quickly informed that the *propriétaire* would be most charmed to entertain her, and she was shown to a comfortable little room on the second floor, and there she had some excellent coffee and rolls.

"I want," she said to the *propriétaire* when she had finished her repast, "I want to go to Vitreuil. Is it possible to go there and back in one day?"

"Oh, yes, madame," replied the buxom landlady.

"What station do you go from?"

The good woman informed her of the station, and also that she knew Vitreuil very well; that it was an extremely pretty place, but quite unfrequented by the English.

"Oh, I am going to see some French people," said

Marty, who was rapidly acquiring quite an independent air.

She found that there was a morning train which she could just catch, so she engaged a *voiture* and went off on the second stage of her journey. It was a pleasant and easy run to Vitreuil, and Marty walked up the countrified road and into the little town with a feeling that she had indeed chosen a very good hiding-place.

A single inquiry brought her to the door of the convent. "See, mademoiselle," said her guide, who never dreamed that Marty was a married woman, "you go up those steps and ring the bell hanging opposite the glass door."

Marty thanked the girl and followed her directions. At the top of the steps was a sort of small court, covered in, and filled with all sorts of flowering plants and green shrubs. She rather timidly pulled at the handle hanging by a thick steel chain, which she supposed was the bell. The sound came back with a great clanging noise, such as made her wonder what would have been the effect if she had pulled hard, and a minute or two later a young French girl came out. She was of the peasant class, intensely stupid and extremely dirty, not to say slovenly. Of her Marty demanded if she could see the Reverend Mother. The girl replied that she didn't know, she thought the Reverend Mother was engaged, but that it was probable that Madame Angelique would be able to see visitors. So forthwith she ushered Marty into what she called the *parloir*, a great bare, gloomy apartment, covered with Chinese matting, its walls surrounded by hard cane-seated chairs, its mural decorations consisting of pictures of St Joseph and the Holy

Virgin, its one touch of worldliness being a piano.

Marty sat down on the nearest chair. She was absolutely unable to stand, for her legs were shaking under her, but she had not been waiting many minutes before a black-robed, white-coiffed sister entered the room.

There were the customary greetings between caller and hostess, the usual begging that she would give herself "the trouble of sitting down," and then Madame Angelique looked at her questioningly, as if to ask the object of her visit. Marty opened her purse and took out of it the little folded slip of paper.

"I—I saw this in a newspaper, madame," she said.

"But yes, mademoiselle?" responded the Sister, still in an inquiring tone.

"And I—I—I came down to see the place—to see if I could make arrangements to live here for a little while."

"Did I understand aright?" said Madame Angelique, "is it madame or mademoiselle?"

"It is madame," said Marty. "I—" she felt that some explanation was absolutely necessary at this point—"My husband is away. I want to live somewhere very quietly. I couldn't afford to pay very much."

"Our regular terms," said the Sister, "are four francs a day."

"And that includes?" said Marty, who was a business woman before everything, mind you!

"But yes. The little *déjeuner*, the *grand déjeuner*, *gouter*—"

"*Gouter?*" said Marty, inquiringly.

"Ah, a bit of cake—a tartine—a drink of cider. We don't provide English tea," said the Sister.

"I see. Yes, I understand. It is a something—a taste?"

"Exactly! Precisely so. And then *dîner*, and the service, *bougies*—everything, *enfin*, but soap!"

"Not my washing?" said Marty.

"Not your personal washing — no, madame, no! But it isn't dear. It doesn't come to much here. Would you stay with us very long?"

"Perhaps a month," said Marty. "I—I—yes, it might be a month, or it might be two months; I couldn't tell. I shouldn't like to bind myself."

"There's no need," said Madame Angelique; "there's no need whatever. You are of our faith?"

"No, I am not a Catholic," said Marty.

"There is no English church here."

"I will go to your church," said Marty. "Need I give you references, beyond paying my first week? I don't know anybody in Paris."

"But no!" said the Sister, smiling; "money is always a very good reference, madame, when the one referred to is as young and looks so innocent as you do."

CHAPTER XXI

AN ASYLUM

It was just twelve o'clock when Marty got back into Paris. She took a *voiture* to her hotel, and found she had a tremendous appetite for the meal she found waiting to satisfy her needs. She told Madame *la propriétaire* that she had made her arrangements to leave the following day.

She sat, after she had done eating, for quite an hour at the window of the *salle à manger*, watching the stream of life passing to and fro in the street. Then all at once a feeling came over her that she must be in the *mouvement* as well as a spectator of it. So she put on her things again and sallied forth into the street. She had never been in Paris in her life, and she was supremely miserable, but not for one moment did her business instincts, and what I might call her *gamin* capacity for taking care of her herself, desert her.

She got into the first tram car that she saw, and took a ticket for the furthest place that it went to. This happened to take her along some of the very best parts of Paris, along the boulevards, and to the very edge of the Bois de Bologne. She got out at the end of the journey, and walked on and on until at last she came to another route into Paris, and there

she entered another tram car and began her journey back again. The walk through the Bois had taken her a good deal out of herself. There were a few children at play, a few couples idling away the golden hours, and one or two men who looked at her as if they would like to know her history. It was quite an off day for the world, and Marty felt refreshed both in body and mind. But she was very miserable.

Arrived back at the hotel, she inquired for a Directory of Paris, and there she looked out, and noted down in a little book which she had by her, the various employment agencies to which she might apply for work. Those connected with the English colony—that is to say, those with English names—she put out of the running at once, but she noted down half a dozen advertisements which seemed to her likely and respectable.

She had arranged to go down to Vitreuil the following day by the five-o'clock train, and she determined that she would spend the earlier part of the day in looking out for some kind of employment. With this idea firmly fixed in her mind, she dined and passed the evening, going very early to bed, and requesting the *femme de chambre* to bring her the "little breakfast" at eight o'clock.

When morning came she bade adieu to the little hotel soon after ten o'clock, going away with her luggage, and without specially mentioning her destination. She drove straight to the station for Vitreuil, and then, taking another *voiture*—for she did not know her way about Paris—she went to the most likely bureau of those on her list. This proved to be merely a *bureau de placement*, and as Marty neither wanted to be a lady's maid, nor yet a *femme*

de chambre, she left without giving any details about herself.

Arrived in the street again, she took out her little book and consulted the notes which she had made the previous evening. The next bureau on her list was one which was in the same street as that which she had just come from, so she walked along until she found it. At this place she paid a fee, and her name was duly entered in the book—"Mrs Johnson, at the Convent of Notre Dame de Providence, Vitreuil."

The lady who was in charge of the desk told her that the chance of placing her was very uncertain; she might find something that very day, she might be a month. Marty explained that she would prefer something of a business nature; that she could well undertake a position in a hotel or in a shop; that she knew nothing about teaching, and had no particular wish to be companion to a lady. The lady at the desk said that she would certainly do her best, that madame was young and attractive, and that she would probably find work as easily as anybody. So they parted on terms of mutual compliments.

In this way Marty went through the entire list in her little book. She met with no success—with promises, with fair words—and she parted with a little money. Still, although nothing but hope had been the result of her morning's work, she went and took her *déjeuner* with a comfortable feeling that she had set matters in train. Then she had a couple of hours—rather more—to spare before she need think about the train. So she went and sat on a seat in the Champs Elysées, and opened an English newspaper of the previous day, which she had bought at a kiosk hard by. Instinct made her turn to the "Agony

Column." There was no message to Marty, no agonised "Come home, darling! All will be forgiven and forgotten!" No, there was nothing of the kind, only the chill blank of silence. And Marty, who quite forgot that an advertisement in the pages of the *Daily Telegraph* was an impossibility until the next issue of the paper, sat staring at nothing, and feeling that she had shut herself out of her world indeed.

There is a point in the lives of most of us when the black despair of our outlook upon the future seems to be too dense for any ray of hope to penetrate. During the time that Marty sat on that seat in the Champs Elysées, it was certainly the turning-point of her career. She had not until that moment realised the full effect of her action. In a way she had felt a grand unselfish sense of heroism; she had buoyed herself up with the idea that if the whole world knew that she had voluntarily cut herself off from the two people that she loved most on earth, because she felt that she had wronged her husband by allowing him to marry her, the whole world would necessarily applaud and belaud her. She had felt that it would be a bitter pang to George, and a pang, though less poignant, to her mother, but the fact of finding that her name was not to be seen in the "Agony Column" of the *Daily Telegraph* on the day following her flight seemed to give an entirely new turn to the current of her thoughts.

So they had quietly acquiesced in her departure. Well, perhaps they had not thought of advertising, perhaps Georgie had realised the sound common-sense and reasonableness of her parting letter, perhaps—oh, she thought of a dozen applications of the word "perhaps," and at the end of it all she came to her own

senses with a start, to feel herself blank, alone, home-sick, soul-sick for the love that she had resolutely shut herself away from.

But although Marty was young, and was supposed by her mother in some ways to favour her dead-and-gone father, there was a strain of resoluteness in her nature which was a combination inherited from her two parents. She stood up with her eyes looking towards the bright glow in the western sky, and mentally shook off her weakness as a dog shakes water from his coat.

"I knew it would be hard the first few days," her thoughts ran, "and after the first few days, and for always and always; but I thought it all out, and I'm going to stick to it—I'm going to stick to it!" And so she turned and went towards the street in which she knew she could get her tram, her face as resolute, her step as firm as if the whole story of the past had never had an existence.

Two hours later she was installed in a small white bedroom at the convent at Vitreuil, the little bedroom which was to be her haven of refuge until she should find her way more clearly marked. It was clean and plain. One or two sacred pictures hung on the walls, a crucifix over the head of the bed; there was no pretence at ease in the chairs, they were rush-seated and of the plainest description. A mere strip of carpet was laid along the side of the bed, all the rest of the floor being highly polished. White dimity curtains hung at the window, and a valance of the same material surrounded the bed. The bed looked comfortable, even to luxury, with its large square pillows and its spotless linen; all the rest was a blank, a mere featureless blank, and Marty had no

possessions of her own which would give it any individual touch, and make it into a semblance of a home. It had been sufficiently light when she took possession of it for her to be aware of the fact that the view from the window was positively superb, stretching for miles across country at a lower level than the ground upon which the little town of Vitreuil stood; she could even then see a gleam of silver water and the shadows of dark trees.

"I shall be hidden!" was her comment, as she drew the curtain across the window; "at least I shall be hidden!"

She stayed in her bedroom until the bell went for dinner. Her few things were soon arranged and put away in the modest wardrobe and the still more modest chest of drawers which formed her dressing-table. She knew nothing of the ways of the convent, so she changed her blue serge dress for the black one, and washed her hands in the tiny bowl which was all that was provided for that purpose. She stood with some amazement looking at the very big can of water and the very small basin. However, it was not for her to find fault or to grumble at what she found. The place was cheap, and it was safe. If the washing basin would only accommodate one hand at a time, well, she would get used to it. So, when the bell went, she turned with a sigh and went downstairs. When I say she went downstairs, pray don't imagine that she simply went from an upper storey to a lower one. Nothing of the kind! She descended one flight of stairs, went along a corridor, and descended another flight. This brought her to the upper garden, and having passed several large class-rooms, whose windows and doors were all set wide open to the evening air,

she went down another flight of garden steps, across a gravelled courtyard, and into the main building.

The pupils were all flocking into the *salle à manger*. Of all the sea of faces—quite a hundred and thirty of them—there was only that of Madame Angelique which was at all familiar.

"Come this way, madame," she said, coming to meet Marty and taking her kindly enough by the hand—for nuns, let me tell you, are very kindly; "you are to sit next to the Reverend Mother at the high table with us, not with the children. Let me bid you welcome to our board." She still kept hold of Marty's hand, and deftly led her along until they reached the place where the Reverend Mother was standing. The next moment Marty found herself, fronted by a large, distinguished-looking woman, somewhat getting on in years, and of a very benign and benevolent cast of countenance. "This, Reverend Mother," said Madame Anglique, "is Madame Johnson, our new *pensionnaire*."

The Reverend Mother took Marty by both hands in a firm and welcoming grasp, and kissed her cordially on both cheeks. "You are indeed very welcome among us, dear lady," she said. "I hope you will be very happy while it suits you to stay. Anything that you want, I trust you will not hesitate to come to my room and apprise me of. If I can arrange things to your satisfaction you may command me."

Then she indicated that Marty should sit down, and gave the three raps on the table, signifying that she was about to say grace.

CHAPTER XXII

THE REVEREND MOTHER

THE task of telling you how Marty lived in the Convent of Notre Dame de Providence at Vitreuil is one from which I would fain excuse myself. I have a constitutional dislike to dwelling on pain of any kind, whether it be pain of the body, the bones, the nerves, or pain of the heart or mind. Marty was blessed with superb health; had she not been, she never could have withstood the strain upon her mind and nerves which life at Vitreuil put upon her. I must tell you all this, because I set out to tell the story of Marty—not just the pleasant side, not just how she and George Etherington met and loved and were wed; no, I set out to tell you the actual story of Marty, and so I must give you some idea of how she existed at the convent at Vitreuil.

At first everything was strange. It amused her to see the good Sisters—every one of them bearing noble names, though Marty did not know it—enjoying their meals. Marty had not come of a noble family, but she certainly ate her food much more daintily and prettily than those noble French ladies, whose regular custom was to lick their soup spoons clean, polish them thoroughly in their table-napkins, and put them away in the drawers immediately under-

neath their places at table. With the others, a bowl of doubtful-looking water was passed from one to the other, and spoons, forks and knives were dipped therein and carefully polished and put away. This reduced the service of the establishment—included, mind you, in Marty's four francs a day—almost to a nicety of nothingness. The food was good of a kind, but it was the kind that poor Marty did not like—plenty of soup, more or less vegetarian in character; excellent plain bread (not the kind of bread which you find in a Parisian hotel, my dear reader, delicate and flaky as a summer sunrise, but a good, solid, homely, plain bread); then there was usually some sort of meat, except on Fridays and other fast days, and invariably a course of vegetables or of fruit of some kind. To Marty, accustomed to excellent English cooking, these meals were a terrible trial. She missed her afternoon tea, so much so that one day when she was in Paris, interviewing half a dozen persons with a view to employment, all of whom proved absolutely impossible, she bought a pound of tea at an exorbitant price, and a little teapot. She also bought a little thin china cup and saucer, a tiny jug, and one small teaspoon, not a silver one; and with her bundle of purchases she went back to Vitreuil quite in a glow of happiness. There are times in our lives when very small things make us happy, or if they do not make us happy, at least they make us less unhappy than we were. And after that, every day at four o'clock she used to put her little modicum of tea into her little teapot, and go down with teapot and milk jug into the kitchen, getting one replenished with boiling water, and the other with new milk. They did not charge her extra

for the milk—oh, no, for they were not rapacious, these good Sisters, not in the least.

From the time of that purchase four o'clock became the one bearable hour in the day. Poor Marty! Still, she had two objects in life; she had set herself to acquire a real knowledge of French, recognising that while she was in a wholly French atmosphere it was not necessary for her ever to hear a single word of English, and certainly, unless she sought for it, she would not have the chance of reading it; and she had set herself to find some employment. But it was hard and dry work, and her soul yearned fiercely for everything that she had left behind—for her mother, for the quiet, comfortable little house which she had called home so long; for the movement of a London life, for staid Sarah and excellent Ann, for Amabel, and most of all, oh, yes, incomparably most of all, for Georgie.

Still, an idea that she was mistaken in her course, that she had taken a wrong line, never entered the girl's head. She had set herself to carry out a certain scheme, and she never faltered or turned back, she never wavered in her resolutions. She had set herself to advance her knowledge of French, and not one single day did she neglect the task which she had imposed upon herself. It is true that she had set herself, too, to find some employment in Paris, or in the neighbourhood of Paris; but that was a task which did not lie within her means to accomplish.

The weeks went by, the days grew shorter and shorter, until Christmas was close at hand. Marty's money was slowly going, and she had quite made up her mind that when another month had gone by she must put her pride in her pocket and seek some

lower form of occupation. She felt that it would not do to break into her last ten pounds. She had had letters from various agents in Paris, so that her absence of correspondence from home was not noticed by any of those among whom she was living.

Christmas came and went. Marty had dreaded it terribly, but when it came there was little in the strange world in which she found herself to remind her of the one which she had left behind. Even New Year did not try her more than the details of her everyday life. And time sped on with relentless wing. She was still safely hidden, but she had advanced towards providing for the future not at all.

It happened one day towards the end of January that Marty came down with a letter which she wished to put in the post-bag. It was about five o'clock in the day; the cold was intense. The letter-box was fixed in the wall just outside the *grande porte*, and Marty turned away with a shiver and ran to gain the shelter of the house once more. She ran absolutely into the Reverend Mother's arms.

"Ah, my dear little lady," cried the head of the establishment, "but you can run!" She was really a person of very gay and jovial disposition, a woman whose *métier* was distinctly of the world worldly.

"I have only been to put a letter in the box," said Marty.

The Reverend Mother, or, as she was usually called, Madame St Hilaire, took the girl's slim little hand between her own two firm, warm, white ones. "My poor little lady, you are very cold," she said. "Come into my room and warm yourself. There's a good fire there."

She drew her towards the little room just at the

top of the first flight of stairs, and next to the great *parloir*. It was a cosy little sanctum, and might have been the private sitting-room of any lady of *affaires*.

"Sit here, my child," said Madame St Hilaire, indicating a large easy chair tucked close in against the wood fire which burned upon the hearth. The Reverend Mother herself pulled forward a heavy oaken chair with a high back and great carved arms, and in this she sat herself down, contemplating her little visitor with a benign smile.

"You must learn, my dear child," she said, "that, no matter what you are accustomed to do in your England, it isn't wise to trot in and out of the house at this time of the year without any wraps. You should slip on a big shawl or a wrapper, something quite warm, when you run to the door to post a letter. Why, you are quite blue with the cold!" she exclaimed.

Marty looked down at her hands, which she was slowly chafing together before the fire. "Yes, my hands are cold, madame," she said. "I don't think my vitality is very high just now."

"You are not happy?" said Madame St Hilaire.

"No, I am not very happy." For the life of her Marty could not have lied to this mild-eyed woman.

"You are going to stay with us longer even than you thought?"

"I don't think so. I don't think that I must stay much longer. I—I—can't afford it," said Marty.

"You'll go back to England?"

"No, I'm not going back to England."

She shuddered involuntarily, and the Reverend Mother got up and moved towards a little carved

cupboard which hung upon the wall. "I'm going to give you a little cordial," she said. "Believe me, you must never again run out to post a letter without something warm to protect you. This is an excellent liqueur; it comes from the monastery ten miles away. It would almost put warmth into a stone." She poured out some of the cordial into a little glass and handed it to Marty. "I have been watching you for some days," she said, "I may say for some weeks."

It was on the tip of Marty's tongue to correct her and say that she had been watching her ever since she had entered the house, but she withheld the remark and merely acknowledged the Reverend Mother's words.

"And I have seen," went on Madame St Hilaire, "I have seen that you are distressed in your mind—something weighs upon it, you are not happy. If you were of our faith I should advise you to see Monsieur l'Abbé at once; as you are not, I would advise you to relieve yourself by telling me everything."

"I couldn't," said Marty.

"It will be as safe," said Madame St Hilaire, "as if you had confided in Monsieur l'Abbé himself. You are very young to carry a secret, you are very young to cope with a trouble. I have my suspicions of why you go to Paris now and again, going in hope and coming back weary and dejected. Confide in me, my dear child, I promise you you'll not regret it."

Already the tears were standing in Marty's eyes; it was the first really kind word that she had received since she had parted from George and her mother. "Madame St Hilaire," she said, winking her eyes very hard, as if she would wink away her weakness,

"I may have done a very foolish thing—I am not sure that I have not—but what I did was done in good faith, and I am going to abide by it. I—I—left my husband. I wasn't good enough for him, I was only a clog upon him. If I had stayed with him it wouldn't have worked, we should have been wretched, because I was not born of the same class. I—I—felt it was better to take myself out of the road. I didn't find it out until after I was married; I would have killed myself rather than have dragged him down, but I didn't find it out until the deed was done."

"What deed?" asked Madame St Hilaire.

"Until we were married, I meant," said Marty, humbly. "We—we went a little tour after our marriage, and then my eyes were opened."

"By him?"

"No, not by him, never by him; he was everything that was good and kind and loving to me; but I felt I had wronged him, and that I must go away."

"You wronged him more," said Madame St Hilaire, "by going away than you would have done by remaining. It is never right, my child, to run away from our duty. If you had made a mistake he was not cognisant of it. You had no right to go away and leave him; that's the only wrong thing that you have done."

"No," said Marty, "I thought it all out. I knew it would be a wrench for me at first, but I took the wise course, I cut it short in the beginning, before it got too hard for him to part with me."

"I wish, my child," said Madame St Hilaire, "that you would let me tell this story to Monsieur l'Abbé. He is a wise man, a man who knows men and cities

—a man of the world. The life of a *religieuse* is not always the wide life ; the life of a *curé* is not necessarily narrow. I wish you would confide in him. I am convinced that you have only one line of duty before you, and that is to go back to your husband."

CHAPTER XXIII

HARKING BACK

It is seldom my habit in telling a story to hark back. The stories that I have to tell flow, as a rule, in an unbroken stream from source to mouth; backwaters do not trouble me, side streams do not attract me; I like to begin and end a story in an unbroken line. But all stories do not lend themselves to this. Sometimes it is absolutely necessary to hark back and let the reader know what has happened while we have been traversing a certain portion of the journey; and so now, although it is against my custom, I must hark back, back to the night when George Etherington and Mrs Benyon realised that something terrible had come into their lives, realised in a far-off kind of way that their hearts were broken.

The last words that Mrs Benyon uttered to her son-in-law before he left the house the following morning were words of warning. "Now, George," she said, "do be advised by me. Except in the way of business, don't tell anybody that we have lost Marty. You'll be on her track as soon as the detectives can get to work, and if we can get her back it can all be hushed up and nobody know a word about it."

"You are right, Mater," said George, "you are perfectly right. Of course, my people will think it

rather queer if it's more than a day or two before we find her, but we must risk that; and even if we do have to tell them, we needn't let it go further than the governor and my mother. They'll be discreet enough; we needn't have any fear on that score. Besides," he added, with a valiant backward movement of his head, "once we get those fellows to work we shall have her back before we know where we are."

He bent down and kissed her, and marched away up the street as gallant a young bridegroom as any mother-in-law ever parted from. Mrs Benyon watched him till he turned the corner, then she put up her hand and touched her cheek—it was wet, but the tears were not hers.

She turned and went into the house again, walking into the dining-room and standing looking at the fire with eyes that saw nothing. "This is a pretty piece of business," she said to herself. "Now, what did that child hear said about her? It must have been something horrid, something very out of the common to make her take such a step as this. Well, I can't sit down and be idle; I've got my work to attend to, no matter what happens." Then she touched the bell, drew her hand back, hesitated. "Yes, I'll—I'll ring for Sarah," she said, and rang.

In a minute or so Sarah came bustling in.

"I have something to tell you, Sarah," said Mrs Benyon.

"About Miss Marty, ma'am? Where is she, I'd like to know? It isn't a natural thing for Miss Marty to go out of the house—"

"Have done," said Mrs Benyon. "A good many things in this world are not natural, Sarah. Jealousy

isn't exactly natural, but it's jealousy that has driven my poor girl—"

"Driven!" interrupted Sarah, fiercely.

"Yes, driven her away," said Mrs Benyon, leaning her elbow on the chimney-shelf and shading her eyes with her hand. "We don't know what's happened, Sarah—neither Mr Etherington nor I. He never thought to tell me when they came home, for he thought that she had put it out of her dear mind—"

"Then it happened when they was away?" said Sarah.

"Yes, when they were away at one of those horrid French hotels somebody said something about her, and it sank so deep into her dear heart that she determined—she determined she would go away and leave us. What it could have been," she cried, gazing up at the ceiling and stretching out her hands appealingly, "to have made my poor little girl think that she wasn't good enough for the mother that bore her and the husband that wedded her I can't tell. It's beyond me, Sarah."

"Miss Marty not good enough!" cried Sarah. "I'd like to see the person Miss Marty wasn't good enough for."

"I don't know that I should," said Mrs Benyon, suddenly descending to a sensible tone once more. "Anyway, that's not exactly the question, Sarah. Miss Marty has taken it into her head that she made a mistake in marrying, because she's not good enough for her husband—and she's gone."

"And you are standing here idle, ma'am!" said Sarah.

"My going out into the street and tearing my hair won't do anything towards bringing Miss Marty

back," said Mrs Benyon in a tone midway between severity and tremorousness. "Mr Etherington has gone off to one of the first detectives in London; he's putting the case entirely in his hands. Meantime, Sarah, the least said the soonest mended. We shall have her back, oh, yes," she said, in that tone which people use when they want to convince themselves more than those to whom they are talking, "oh, yes, we shall have her back before we have realised that she has gone. It only means getting touch with her. Once get touch with her, Mr Etherington will convince her easily enough that she was mistaken, poor darling; that she is more precious to him even than she is to me, which is saying a good deal, Sarah."

"And to me," said Sarah, with a sniff.

"Yes, Sarah, you have loved me and mine."

"But Miss Marty had my heart," said Sarah, with a gurgle; "of you all, Miss Marty had my heart. I loved that dear child; I loved her when she was a little toddling thing—you know it, ma'am."

"Yes, my poor Sarah, I know it," said Mrs Benyon. And then she suddenly gave way, and somehow the two women, so serious, middle-aged and practical as they were, fell sobbing in one another's arms.

For some days the secret was kept. George Etherington passed all the time when he was not absolutely wanted at the office in the quarters of private detectives; but it was as if Marty had disappeared from the face of the earth.

That was a terrible week to everybody at No. 28 Rosediamond Road. Every morning George Etherington went away buoyed up with hope from his mother-in-law; every morning after she saw him turn the corner, Mrs Benyon went back into the

house and gave way to tears; and every morning the excellent Sarah came into the dining-room and railed at the world in general, and French hotels in particular. She did not know much of the world, she knew nothing of French hotels, and, after all, neither the world in general, nor French hotels in particular, were responsible for the exact state of affairs in that modest establishment; but it was always the same, and the effect of Sarah's diatribes on those two points was equally sure to make Mrs Benyon dry her eyes and declare that standing there crying wouldn't help to bring her dear child back again.

At the end of the week a serious question presented itself to the three conspirators.

"I'd like to know, ma'am," said Sarah to her mistress, "how I am to put visitors off any longer? Miss Amabel has been three times to call on Miss Marty, and when she came this afternoon she says, quite fierce like, 'Has anything happened to Mrs Etherington, Sarah?' 'Not as I'm aware of, miss,' said I. 'She came to see me the day after she got back home from her honeymoon,' said Miss Amabel, 'and I was out. I haven't set eyes upon her since her wedding day. You can give Mrs Etherington my love, and tell her that of course if she doesn't wish to see me I shouldn't dream of intruding.'"

"Intruding!" sobbed Mrs Benyon. "What did you say, Sarah?"

"Well, ma'am, I was that took aback I hardly knew what to say. At last I did manage to stammer out something."

"What was the something?"

"Well, ma'am, I said that nothing had happened,

or ever would happen, to make Miss Marty think any differently of Miss Amabel, but that she had been very bothered and very busy seeing after her flat, and that practically we had seen nothing of her ourselves."

"Which was true!" sobbed Mrs Benyon; "true, Sarah, true."

"I think I managed to smooth Miss Amabel down a bit, but she was that huffy," said Sarah, spreading out her fat hands and looking at her mistress with a face clouded with a mingled expression of disgust and dismay, "I really hardly knew what to say to her."

"I can quite understand Miss Amabel," said Mrs Benyon. "You are a wise woman, Sarah, but you don't know everything."

"I don't see what Miss Amabel's got to worry herself about," said Sarah, obstinately.

"No, you wouldn't," said Mrs Benyon, "you wouldn't; and yet it's easy enough to those that understand. Miss Marty made a very good marriage, Sarah—"

"Not too good for Miss Marty."

"No, but Mr Etherington comes of a grand family. Mrs Etherington is a lady quite out of the common for this part of the world, and Miss Amabel probably feels—and it's perfectly natural she should—that if Miss Marty doesn't want to see anything of her old friends she won't be the one to push herself in where she isn't wanted. I should feel the same myself," said Mrs Benyon.

"Which Miss Marty isn't one of that there sort," said Sarah.

The tears welled up once more into Mrs Benyon's

eyes. "If only she had thought a little more of herself we shouldn't be mourning after her now," she said sadly. "But you are quite right in one thing, Sarah—we can't keep inquirers at bay much longer. I'm expecting Mr Etherington's mother will be turning in any day now, and what to say to her I'm sure I don't know. But I'll talk to Mr Etherington about it, I'll talk to him."

It was a very sad and dejected-looking young man who came home to dinner that night.

"Any news?" said Mrs Benyon. She always asked if there was any news, poor woman, although she herself had begun to give up hope.

"No, Mater," he said, "there's no news. Mater," he went on, sitting down and shielding his eyes with his hands so that he could look into the fire between them, "Mater, I've begun to think it no good."

"Don't say that, George; don't give up hope," said Mrs Benyon.

"It won't make any difference whether I do or I don't."

"Oh, yes, my dear boy, it will. Don't talk till you've had your dinner. It's my opinion you don't get a proper lunch when you are off by yourself."

"I had a bit of fish and a cutlet to-day," he answered. "I'm all right as far as that goes."

"Well, I've got something very nice for your dinner to-night, dear. We'll have it, and then we'll have a regular talk. I want to ask you about two or three things."

"You haven't heard any news, have you?" he asked.

"My dear boy, do you think I should keep it to myself?"

"No, Mater, I know you wouldn't. The fact is we've tried to keep our secret, Mater, you and I, and from the best of motives, but I don't believe we shall be able to keep it much longer."

"Well, if we can't keep it," said Mrs Benyon, "we must let the world share it. We've no choice in that matter, you and me, George. But what's made you feel this all of a sudden?"

"Because," he said, "when I came in I found a letter from my mother, and I'm perfectly certain, Mater, that she smells a rat!"

CHAPTER XXIV

MRS ETHERINGTON'S ADVICE

As the words left George Etherington's lips, the gong which stood in the little hall warned them that dinner was ready.

"Come, my dear boy," said Mrs Benyon, soothingly, "we'll go and have our dinner, and we'll talk things over afterwards. I don't believe in hungry people doing good work—I never did. I always thought," she went on, in a would-be cheerful voice, as she led the way towards the dining-room, "I always thought it would be such a good use for rate-money if all the children in the Board schools were given the chance of a good meal before they started work in the morning, a snack in the middle of the day, and another warm meal before they went away in the afternoon. I believe," she added, seating herself in her accustomed place, "I believe that it would do away with a great deal of the misery and want of the lower classes. It stands to common sense," she went on, "that a child who is empty cannot take much into its poor little brain."

"I can't say," said George. "I believe statistics say rather the other way, and that overfed people—"

"Oh, I wouldn't overfeed them, oh, dear, no!" said Mrs Benyon, decidedly. "I would just give them suitable, warm, cheap, wholesome food; say a

good plate of milk and porridge for their breakfast, a piece, in the hand and a drink at midday, and a good bowl of warm soup or stew, with a hunch of bread, before they go home at night. I wouldn't feed them on pheasants and such luxuries, oh, dear, no. In my own modest little way I've tried it."

"How, Mater?" George Etherington wasn't really interested in his mother-in-law's attempt at conversation, but he knew that she, good woman, was right to keep him off the main subject just then uppermost in their minds. And so he fell in with her humour, and answered in as interested a way as he could.

"Well, you know," explained Mrs Benyon, "I always have to have a young girl to run errands. I don't pay very much, but it struck me after I first began that the most of the wage went home into mother's pocket and I got a poor, listless, starved, hungry, chilled thing without any wits or any senses about her. So when I got a new girl I paid her a little less wages, and I fed her—her breakfast when she came in the morning, a good meal in the middle of the day, and something before she went away in the evening. The difference it made was absolutely wonderful. I never have any trouble with my errand-girls now; my difficulty is to get rid of them when they get too big and want more money than I can reasonably give; and most of them have done well since they left me. Oh, I believe in feeding, and when any man or woman has got an extra strain on them, like we have just now, I believe in feeding that man or woman. One doesn't enjoy it as one enjoys one's food when one is happy, but, all the same, there's nothing like feeding, and good feeding."

In this simple way she kept him off the subject of Marty until the modest dessert was set on the table.

"Now," she said, "tell me what your mother said."

"I'd better show you the letter."

He handed it to her, and Mrs Benyon took it from him and read it with close attention :—

"My dear George,"—it began,—"I have a kind of feeling that something is wrong with you or your wife, or both of you. What is it? She hasn't been near me since the day after she returned from your honeymoon. I have called, but she was not at home. I have asked her to dinner, but you were engaged. What does it all mean? I have a conviction that something is wrong. Is it that I have hurt or offended you or Marty in any way? I can't imagine my having said or done anything to hurt or offend you, and I am not conscious of any single word which could have upset Marty. I think it better and straighter to go to the point at once and ask you the plain question. I am sure you will understand me. We understand each other so well, and I am particularly anxious that no mother-in-law breaches should arise between us. I shall be glad of your answer, which I await with impatience.—Your always loving Mother."

"It's a very reasonable letter," said Mrs Benyon, after a long pause.

"It's reasonable enough," said George. "How is it to be answered?"

"My dear boy, there's only one way in which it

can be answered," said Mrs Benyon, decidedly, "and that's by telling your poor mother the truth. I don't say it isn't a bitter pill for me," she went on, her voice breaking, and hiding her eyes with her hands. "I don't say it isn't a bitter pill for me, and I can't blame your mother if she turns round and tells you you did the wrong thing when you married Marty. If she'd only see with my eyes—"

"And mine," said George.

"And see how mistaken the poor child is, how misguided, what a wrong line she's taken up, and how she's just doing what she was most anxious to avoid, then it will be all right." And Mrs Benyon wiped her eyes, but immediately covered them with her hand again.

"All right, Mater, I'll go round and get it over. I don't suppose my mother will be out, and I don't suppose she'll have any visitors—at all events, I'll go round and see."

So George Etherington went round to his mother's house. The maid told him that Mrs Etherington was alone; the colonel was out, she believed at the club; and his brothers were neither of them at home.

"That's all right. I wanted to see my mother," said George, putting down his hat and hanging up his coat on the familiar peg.

He found his mother in her pretty drawing-room. "Hullo, mother!" said he.

"Ah, is that you, George?" she said, looking up with a bright smile and extending her firm white hand with its freight of glittering rings to greet him. "You had my note, I suppose?"

"Yes, I got your note," said George; "that is why I've come round."

"You are looking very ill," said his mother.

"I'm feeling worse."

"What has happened?"

"Oh, mother, I don't know how to tell you."

"What!"

"No, not what you think." He recognised the query in her tones and was quick to answer it; "not at all as you think, but, all the same, I don't know how to begin to tell you the tragedy that has come into my life."

"Tragedy?" said his mother.

"Oh, mother, if only we hadn't gone for that—that—damned honeymoon!"

"And what was the matter with the honeymoon? I thought it was a very sensible one."

"Yes, we did. But I don't know why it was, nor who it was, but Marty overheard some damned women talking about her. They said she was common—God knows what they didn't say! I'm sure, poor little soul, her only fault seemed to me that she kept herself to herself, and never made friends with anybody; she wanted nobody but me."

"Well?" said his mother.

"Well, I told her it was all rot, I said everything I could think of, and I thought that I had satisfied her. You don't know the depth of self-sacrifice there is in that little girl."

"Well, what has she done?"

"She's run away."

"What!"

"She's run away," said George, miserably.

"With whom?"

"With whom? All by her little self. My poor little girl! She's only a child, she doesn't know the

ways of the world; she's never been anywhere by herself in her life. God knows where she is! I'm frantic."

"And her mother?"

"Need you ask what her mother is like? She's frantic, too. Here, this will explain. This was the letter of farewell she wrote me. Farewell—as if I could fare well when she was gone."

For once Mrs Etherington had nothing to say. She simply took the letter in silence and made herself master of its contents. When she got to the end of it she was still silent. Then she put up a white hand and brushed something away from her eyes.

"This is dreadful!" she said at last, in a softer tone, "it's dreadful! What have you done? It's nearly a week since you got that letter."

"Yes; I've done everything I could."

"What?"

"Oh, I've been to detectives. I've set them all at work, I've advertised, I've done everything I could think of. She's gone! Whether she's gone into the river, or whether she's taken a passage across and jumped overboard, or what's happened to her, God knows!"

"You mean to say the detectives can't do anything? I thought they could trace out anybody anywhere."

"Oh, they say they can. They haven't traced Marty. We thought, her mother and I, that we should find her in a few days, that we should get her back and nobody know anything about it, and convince her what a mistaken idea hers was, that although she so unselfishly sacrificed herself it was the kind of sacrifice that couldn't do anybody any

good, just the contrary. We thought it might all be hushed up; so she's been out when anybody called, and we thought people might think she was busy getting the flat ready. It's all to no good, mother, it's all to no good. I don't believe I shall ever see her again."

"Did she take anything away with her?"

"Not a thing; not a rag. She just walked out, her own little gay, happy, don't-care self—at least, to all appearances—and we've never seen her since."

"My dear boy, it can't be hidden," said Mrs Etherington, pityingly. "Oh, my dear boy, she was too young, she was too young to take such a responsibility on herself as marriage. This proves it. There's not the balance, there's not the judgment. If she had been three or four years older—"

"But she *wasn't* three or four years older!" cried George, spreading out his hands.

"I know she wasn't, but if she had been she never would have gone. She would have felt, even if it were true, that she must live it down, and get rid of any little—little things there were to get rid of. As it is, what are you going to do now?"

"I can't do anything. I can't wander through the world like a masculine Saracen maid shouting out, 'Marty! Marty! Marty!' I've no choice but to go on as I am, or else chuck it up and go out to America."

"Well, that wouldn't do any good," said his mother, sensibly. "You won't find Marty in America. How much money had she?"

"Forty pounds or so."

"Oh, my dear! Dear, dear, dear! What will your father say when I tell him this?"

"I suppose you will have to tell him?"

"Oh, yes. I never kept anything from your father in my life; he'd never forgive me if I did. Besides, he was fond of her, and he's anxious to know why she never comes near us. He liked the little girl. And the others, George, the others."

"It seems to me," said George Etherington, miserably, "that although at first I felt if it could be kept quiet it would be better, it seems to me in the face of the greater tragedy that the minor ones don't matter."

"I wouldn't quite say that. Now you listen to me; take my advice, and keep it dark as long as you can. Effie has chosen to give herself ridiculous airs, and Dick has chosen to back her up—which I daresay he couldn't help, poor thing. As far as we can we'll keep it just between our four selves."

"Mater's servants know. But they've been with her for ever, you know; they're safe as houses."

"I was thinking," said Mrs Etherington, "that there can't be the smallest necessity to tell Effie or Dick, or, for the matter of that, your own brothers, a single word about it."

CHAPTER XXV

ON THE TRACK

But it was as if Marty had vanished into space. The weeks went by, and no trace of her could be found. Mrs Benyon began to grow thin and white with strain and anxiety; George was—as the men who knew him told each other—the most hangdog-looking bridegroom that ever was seen. The difficulty of keeping the truth from all and sundry was enormous.

"Where are you living, old chap?" said one smart young man, with whom he had been on the best of terms ever since he had taken up his appointment.

"I am staying with my mother-in-law," said George.

"Oh, are you really? A dangerous experiment, rather, eh?"

"Not the least in the world," said George. "I am quite devoted to her."

"You don't say so! That's rather a new state of affairs. Well, when are we coming to pay our respects to your wife?"

"Oh, it's awfully good of you, old fellow," said George, "but not until we get into our own house—if you don't mind. The fact is, my wife isn't very well."

"Isn't she? I'm sorry for that. Where are you going to pitch your tent?"

"Well, somewhere in Victoria Street," said George, hurriedly. "We haven't decided on the exact spot yet, but we've seen one or two flats, and—the fact is my wife isn't able to look after it all, and she is very anxious nothing should be done without her." Which was true, as he miserably reminded himself as the words passed his lips.

"Ah, I see. Well, you'll let us know, old fellow, because we've always been such good chums, you and I and all the rest of us, and we shouldn't like to be wanting in respect when you take a wife to yourself. Besides, we all liked her on the wedding day, and we should like to see her again."

"It's awfully good of you, old fellow. I'll let you know as soon as we are settled. I'm afraid it won't be until the New Year."

Poor George! The New Year! And there was no sign of Marty.

As soon as he was free of work that afternoon he betook himself, as he did on most days, to the office of the private detective who had the case in hand. "Any news, Mr Spruce?"

"I'm sorry to say there's not the smallest clue, Mr Etherington."

"I thought you detective gentlemen could find out anything?"

"In a general way we can. Sometimes these simple cases baffle us from beginning to end. If ever we fail, it's always with a woman. You see, there was nothing remarkable about Mrs Etherington's appearance; just an ordinary young lady, quietly dressed, of quiet appearance. There are generally some such young ladies leaving every railway station by every train. We don't know where her thoughts

were, we don't know what her predilections were—you don't, either, so we can't. We have absolutely nothing to go on, and a lady, a young lady, of ordinary height and size, can change her appearance in such a marvellous way by a few touches that really you mustn't blame us."

"I am not blaming you," said George, miserably, "but I, naturally, want to find my wife."

"You don't think—she never let drop a hint of any place she would like to go to?"

"Never. She was very young; I don't think she had ever thought about it. There's one place I'm sure she wouldn't go to, and that's France."

The detective made a mental note of this remark. "You think not? Why?"

"She hated it."

"Eh? Perhaps that's the very reason why she'd go there."

"Oh, no, no. She hated France. She was unhappy there. She oughtn't to have been, but she was. It was owing to what she heard people in France say that made her take it into her head that she would do me the best service she could by relieving me of her presence."

"But they weren't French people who said it?"

"No, they were English people, curse them!" said George.

"Ay, curse them, and curse them a thousand times over, Mr Etherington," said the detective, quietly; "and although you may never know it, and probably never will, the punishment of that kind of mischief-making is generally pretty sure."

"All the punishment in the world wouldn't serve me," said George, wretchedly.

"No, no, I know that. I was thinking of it in general terms, not in a personal way at all. I do wish, Mr Etherington, I had been of more use to you. Mind you, I haven't given up hope, oh, dear, no! I've got agents at work in all parts of the world, and we may get wind of her at any moment."

"You may," said George. "For myself, do you know what I believe?"

"No."

"I believe she—I believe," he was deeply interested in the ends of his fingers, and had to wait a moment before he could sufficiently control his voice to get the words out, "I believe she made an end of it."

"No, no! Very young people don't think of that. She was a good plucked one, your good lady—she must have been. It was the last thing she'd think of. If she'd been ten years older she might have done, but at seventeen—no, no, I'll never believe it."

All the same, the detective, in his heart of hearts, if he did not exactly believe it, felt a qualm come over him, a qualm which told him that the young husband might be right.

So they went on from day to day and from week to week. Given a distinct hint in that direction, for Mr Spruce was a great believer in luck, the detective turned all his forces on to French soil; I mean to say, he set what he called his "French machinery" to work. If Marty had been living in Paris itself there is little doubt but that they would have found her. They did indeed go so far as to inquire at all the bureaux at which an English woman would be likely to seek employment, and arrived at two of the very bureaux in which Marty's name was put down.

"Emily Saunders, twenty-one, tall, fair," read out the lady in charge of one of these for his information.

"Not her," said Mr Spruce's agent.

"Margaret Winton. Now what is Margaret Winton like? Oh, thirty-three—thirty-three. H'm. Well, that was the short fat lady wasn't it, Mademoiselle Hélène?"

"Yes, very stout and short. Wears spectacles."

"She might wear spectacles," commented the agent, "but she couldn't make herself stout and short."

"We placed her, didn't we, mademoiselle?"

"Yes, madame. Miss Margaret Winton is living at Passy, in the family of a doctor—an English doctor with a large practice there—and has charge of two little children."

"That can't be the lady I want," said the agent. "However, I'll take down the address if you don't mind. There's just a chance that it might be, though I think it isn't. Well, who else have you got in the books?"

"Mrs Johnson—Elizabeth—twenty-two. Staying at the Convent of Notre Dame de Providence at Vitreuil."

"What is she like?"

"That little English madame who has been several times, mademoiselle? You have seen her more often than I. What should you say she was like?"

"Very fair," said Mademoiselle Hélène.

"Fair? I shouldn't call her fair," declared madame. "I should call her dark. She has dark hair."

"No, no! Reddish hair, inclining to blonde—quite *chatain*."

"Did you place her at the convent?"

"No, not at all. She came to us from there. She speaks very good French. She wanted a place in an office, or a superior place in a shop, or in a very smart tea-room; in fact, she didn't care what she did as long as she got some sort of employment."

"Is she a widow?"

"No, not a widow. Husband is away for a time. I don't think that's the lady you are looking for."

"How do you know what sort of a lady I am looking for?" asked the agent.

"Well, she didn't give me the impression of a lady that would be wanted by anybody, and of course I know you're a detective. She's all right."

"All the same, I think I'll take the address," said the agent.

So he took down the address of Mrs Elizabeth Johnson, at Vitreuil.

"Any more besides her?" he inquired.

"Well, there's that Scotch girl. Speaks French with a most curious accent, not an English accent at all—Maud M'Gregor. We placed her, didn't we?"

"Oh, yes. Maud M'Gregor went to her situation last week," replied mademoiselle. "She's very tall—red hair—freckled face—light blue eyes. Excellent references."

"Then," said Madame, turning over the page "there was Winifred Moore, quite a young lady, not more than seventeen."

"What about her?"

"Rather tall, and wanted to get into a school to teach English. Very shy and hesitating in manner; speaks fair French."

"I'll take her address too."

There were one or two others, and the agent, thinking to be on the safe side, took the addresses of all of them; and then he started in a journey around Paris in search of them.

Naturally he left the lady living at the convent at Vitreuil to the last, and as he was somewhat new at the work, he was very much disheartened by his non-success by the time he alighted from the train at the little station at Vitreuil. It was easy for him to find the convent. He reconnoitred the fine large building, saw various people come in and out, and finally got hold of one of the servants. To her he held out a broad five-franc piece, and told her he would give it to her if she would point out to him the young English lady who was staying there.

Now it happened that Marty had gone up to Paris that day, partly to make a round of the employment bureaux. Therefore Leontine, with an ingenuity which was very characteristic of her class, not seeing why she should lose a good five-franc piece for the sake of a little accuracy, took him through the kitchen, which happened to be empty save for herself at that hour, and pointed out the German governess, who was walking up and down the lower courtyard with one of the good Sisters.

"That?" he said. "Oh, thank you very much. Here you are!" And away he went, feeling that he had indeed found himself in a *cul-de-sac*.

Meantime Marty had gone to Paris, and her peregrinations took her, during the course of the afternoon, to the very bureau where her address had been given to the agent.

"Ah, what a pity you didn't come in two hours

ago, madame," said the good lady, beaming on her behind her *pinze-nez.*

"Why, have I missed something?"

"Oh, well, for the matter of that, perhaps not. There's been a gentleman—we thought he was a detective—inquiring the whereabouts of a young English lady. He took the address of every likely one on our books."

"Including mine?" said Marty.

"Of course, madame, naturally. But you see, Mademoiselle Hélène," she continued volubly, turning to her assistant, "you see, Mademoiselle Hélène, I was not wrong. Madame is not in any sense blonde."

"I said *chatain,*" said mademoiselle, shrugging her shoulders. "Her hair is reddish."

"Yes, but it's dark hair for all that. Nobody would call madame a blonde."

"You described me as a blonde? Oh, how funny. Perhaps I look so to some people. However," said Marty, "I just came in to tell you that it's no use your troubling to look out for any more places for me."

"You are placed, madame?"

"I have got the chance of a very good place in Russia," said Marty.

CHAPTER XXVI

DRAWN NEARER

Mr Spruce sat in his private office reading the morning's post. Among the letters which lay before him on the table was one from his agent in Paris:—

"I have been all round looking for the lady whose description you sent me, and thought several times that I had lighted upon her; but she is certainly not in Paris," he wrote, "and I don't think that she has been in Paris during the time you name. If you have any further instructions for me to go further afield, will you apprise me of them at once?"

Mr Spruce put down the letter with a hasty word of disgust upon his lips. "I could have bet my life," his thoughts ran, "that France was her first idea, and that in Paris we should find her. Very strange that I should be so wrong! And yet Villenet is essentially a safe man. I suppose it's no use going behind his word. I hate being baffled by a case. However, time will tell, time will tell. Hang it all, what I hate worse than failure itself is having to face that young fellow when he comes here, and tell him we've gone up another dead end. However, it can't be helped."

Accordingly, later in the day, when George

Etherington made his appearance in the detective's private room, that gentleman had only a shake of the head for him.

"I'm very sorry, Mr Etherington," he said, "but Paris has proved a dead end, just as you said it would."

"I knew it," said George. "Don't worry yourself; you didn't buoy my hopes up. She hated France. You could look for her anywhere else; I told you so, if you remember."

"Yes, you did, you did; and I thought I knew better than you did. I gladly acknowledge myself wrong. It's years, Mr Etherington, since I have been so baffled with a case."

"I suppose," said George, "her very simplicity has deceived you utterly?"

"Yes. Those that make very elaborate preparations for hiding themselves, they generally leave some little trail behind; she's left none."

For a moment George Etherington's heart seemed to stand still, as if it were clutched by an iron band. His face blanched as he turned again towards the detective. "Mr Spruce," he said, "have you anything on your mind that you don't like to tell me?"

"Well, not exactly," the detective replied.

"What do you mean by 'not exactly'?"

"Well, I haven't any evidence."

"No, no evidence, but you think—?"

"Well, Mr Etherington, I'd rather not say anything; I merely think. That isn't the way we conduct our cases. I thought she was in Paris, and I'm very sorry I said it. In a difficult case like this, where the very simplicity of the subject baffles us far more than any amount of cunning would do, we may

go up a dozen roads before we light on one thoroughfare."

"Oh, yes, yes, I know all that," said George. "You are doing your best, I know, Mr Spruce. I suppose I am unduly impatient, but, under the circumstances, you'll—you'll understand."

"Oh, yes, I understand right enough," said the detective, sympathetically, "Besides," he said, "after all, it doesn't much matter what I think."

"You are right there," said George, with a grim laugh. "Well, good-day, Mr Spruce. I am sorry to be such a trouble to you." And then he had to go home to meet the voiceless question in Mrs Benyon's eyes, to see her, as he had seen her day after day for weeks past, pull herself together and say, "Never mind, Georgie. It will all come right in the end. You are doing your best, my dear; your reward will come."

If she had been a very religious woman, Mrs Benyon would have given utterance to a few of those comforting little platitudes which seem to fill so many vacant spaces in many grey and threadbare lives. She would have told him probably that it was the Lord's will, that he must get rid of some burden of pride; she would have reminded him that "Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth." But she did none of these things. She had never had time to think much about religion; to do the right and to provide for her children had always seemed to her religion enough and perhaps it was as well, because this very attitude of hers served to bring George Etherington nearer and nearer to her. Not having been brought up in that way of thinking himself, it would have been maddening to him if Mrs Benyon had consoled him with a

cut-and-dried religion. As it was, he grew nearer to her with every day, and she in her turn grew more and more devoted to him.

"I can't think, Georgie," said his mother to him that very evening when he went to see her, "why you don't come home again."

"No, mother. If I came home everybody would know; they would think that it wasn't all right with Marty."

"Everybody does know, my dear," she said.

"Do they? Yes, I suppose it was inevitable. Still, they would think that I had given up hope, and I haven't given up hope yet, mother."

"I don't like to put it into words, Georgie," said Mrs Etherington, "but do you think there is any chance—"

"Oh, say it out, mother. You may as well say it as think it."

"Well, then," she said, "do you think that there is any chance that the poor little girl made away with herself?"

"I don't know," said he. "Do I think about it?" he went on bitterly. "I think about nothing else. It follows me round like a nightmare, from my bed to my breakfast, from my breakfast to the office. When I come home again it's just the same; when I go to bed, I dream of Marty with all her pretty hair tangled in the water. Oh, it's horrible! And yet—and yet—I think if she were dead she would find some means of coming back to let me know; she would know what horrible suspense I have been in all these many weeks, and she would have let me know, mother, she would have let me know."

"There may be something in that," said Mrs

Etherington, thoughtfully. "Has it ever occurred to you, Georgie, that it would be just as well if you went round to the police-stations and made inquiries? It wouldn't bring any harm to the child."

"No; but I expect Spruce has done that. I told him to leave no stone unturned to find her. And you think everybody knows?"

"Practically everybody, my dear, practically."

"Effie?"

"Well, Effie heard something, and she came with a great story to me about it. I shut her up."

"Oh, you did?"

"Yes. I told her she had been exceedingly unkind to you, and that between that and something somebody else had said your life's happiness had been entirely ruined. I was very hard on her, I was very strong about it."

"I am too miserable," said George, "to be strong about anything. I was indignant with Effie at one time, and with Dick, too, for I thought it was beastly unkind of them to take the stand they did. They might have been civil and friendly without there being any great intimacy. It wasn't as if Effie and I had ever been great chums; we never were, as you know perfectly well, mother. When I got engaged to Marty, she took a tone as if I'd been her lover, instead of a very indifferent brother and nothing more. I thought it was unkind, but I don't think about her at all now; I don't care whether she's paid out or not, mother, dear, I don't care about anything excepting getting my little girl back again. And it's breaking me down; I can't stand very much more of it. I don't want to show the white feather, I am no funk, as you know well enough; it's got beyond that,

it possesses me day and night. I can't get her out of my head."

"My dear boy, it wouldn't be natural if you could. Nobody expects you to; nobody thinks or dreams that you would get her out of your head. It's exactly the same to you as it would be to your father if I suddenly disappeared."

"Yes, but people seem to think because she's young, because we haven't been very long together, that I oughtn't to feel it."

"My dear boy," said Mrs Etherington, "I heard two women talking yesterday. One was condoling with the other on the loss of a baby, and she said to her: 'Of course, I know you lost your son last year, and he was grown up, and so you think that I oughtn't to feel the loss of my baby so much.' And the other woman said: 'Fifteen years ago I lost an infant, a little thing six months old; and last year I lost my eldest, my first—as you say, a grown-up man—and I couldn't say, my dear, that the one was a worse pang than the other.' So don't you mind, Georgie, when anybody seems to think you ought to make light of your loss. They don't mean it, my dear. They want to say comfortable things, and people's ideas of what will comfort one are so strange that nothing seems to come amiss. As for Effie, it doesn't matter what Effie says or what Effie does. Let her mind her own concerns; let her live her own life and keep out of yours. As for the boys, they haven't said anything to you about it. They are young, they don't like even to broach the subject. You mustn't think that they don't feel, that they are not sorry; they are both, Georgie—just as sorry as I am."

"Yes, I gathered that," said he, "I gathered that

only a day or two ago. I think I'll go home, mother."

"Don't go home. Stay a little longer."

"I'm always restless away from Rosediamond Road," he went on. "I always think if I am out of the way for an hour there may be news."

"My dear boy, if there is news it isn't ten minutes' walk. Do you think her mother wouldn't come flying round if there were news of any sort? Oh, Georgie, Georgie!"

"I suppose you are right—yes, of course you are right, mother; you always are. I'm so restless I can't stay anywhere. I don't know how I get through my work at the office; I do it somehow, and everybody is considerate and kind to me. They excuse all sorts of irregularities."

"They know?"

"Oh, yes, I had to tell my chief; and I told one of the other fellows something about it. I suppose it filtered through him to the rest. You can see it in their looks. They don't like to ask me when I go down in the morning if I've found her—they look at me, and it knocks me over for the rest of the day—you know."

"Oh, yes, I know," said Mrs Etherington.

He sat for some minutes with his head buried in his hands. Then his mother got up and went to the side-table, where a maid had set a tray with a tantalus and all arrangements for a drink. She mixed him a whisky-and-soda, and carried it to him.

"Georgie," she said, putting her hand on his shoulder, "I'm afraid you are letting yourself get too low. You know, dear, I've always been so proud of your carefulness and your abstemiousness, but I think

you may carry that a little too far. Don't let yourself get altogether too low. Drink this, dear, and have a biscuit with it."

He took it because it was less trouble than to refuse, and with a great effort he shook himself free of the conversation that had passed between them, and asked his mother if there were any news.

"No," she said, "I don't think there's any news at all. You know Dick Piers has come in for a little money, don't you?"

"Has he? Oh, I'm glad of that."

"It isn't very much—fifteen or sixteen hundred pounds—but still, a nice little windfall. He didn't expect it, either. It's from a godmother who never took any notice of him. So he and Effie are going to Paris for a little jaunt."

CHAPTER XXVII

SMASHED UP!

When Marty left the *bureau de placement* where she first received a hint that detectives were after her, she determined that, come what might, she would not set foot in Paris again. She hied her straight back to her retreat at Vitreuil, and she determined that even in that quiet country place she would not go beyond the walls of the convent if she could possibly avoid it.

The great question was that her money was getting short. She had indeed got within a few francs of her last ten pounds, and as soon as she knew that the Reverend Mother was free she went and sought counsel of her.

"Madame St Hilaire," she said, "I—I want to have half an hour's talk with you. Can you spare me the time?"

"But most certainly, my dear madame," said the Reverend Mother, rising from her chair and going towards the door, where Marty stood, a little shrinking figure not very sure of her welcome. "Come in, come in. Something troubles you. Oh, I have seen it for days past." She closed the door behind Marty, and drew her unresistingly to the bright wood fire which sparkled upon the great iron dogs of the

hearth. "Now sit there in that low chair. You are in trouble. You half confided in me, my poor little girl, and I didn't try to force your confidence, or to force my advice upon you; I never believe in that. You have come to tell me that you have changed your mind, that you will let me communicate with your husband?"

"Madame St Hilaire," said Marty, looking up out of the depths of the low chair with piteous eyes, "I have come to do nothing of the kind."

"What, is the heart of Pharaoh still hardened?" said the Reverend Mother.

"Yes, but it is in a different way to the heart of Pharaoh. His was hard with wickedness; mine is hard—if you can call it hard—from a very different cause. I know that I am doing the right thing, I know that I did the only thing that I could do when I shut the door upon everything that makes the world dear to me. You know we have a poem in our language — 'Let not him that putteth his hand to the plough look backwards.' I put my hand to the plough, Reverend Mother, and I don't come of the sort of people who ever look back."

"I'm sorry," said Madame St Hilaire, "I'm very sorry. I wish it had been otherwise. However, you came, my child, to ask my advice. You'll do better to ask it of Monsieur l'Abbé."

"No, I am afraid of Monsieur l'Abbé. I—I fear priests, and I dread men. I could talk freely to you if you'll let me; you'll advise me as a woman."

"But you won't take my advice. I advised you before."

"I am not going to ask it on that subject. I want

to tell you that I have had the offer of a place in Russia."

"In Russia? Indeed, you are anxious to put the world between you and yours."

"Yes, I would put two worlds between me and mine if I didn't believe it to be wicked, or perhaps—who knows?—if I had courage enough. I daren't do that—I won't, anyway. But this place in Russia, if you recommend me for it, it is mine."

"To do what?" asked the Reverend Mother.

"Oh, Madame St Hilaire, it is to be companion to a young girl, a girl of noble family; to teach her English, to be bright and friendly with her, a sort of reading without tears if you understand me."

"My dear child," said Madame St Hilaire, "you have asked my advice. Well, I give it to you. It is —do not go to Russia. You have never been in Russia, but I have. I wouldn't advise any young girl of no experience of the climate to dream of taking her permanent residence in that country. You are not of their Church, nor of ours; you are Protestant; that would be against you. You don't understand the Russian temperament; that would be against you. You would get terribly home-sick, you would—oh, I strongly advise you not to go."

"I must go somewhere. I must do something for a living," said Marty. "My money has almost come to an end."

"Don't go further away from your own people and your own home than you are now, my child," said the Reverend Mother, a half-wistful sadness creeping over her mobile face. "Don't put further miles between you and your chances of happiness."

"Oh, you are thinking of what is impossible, madame," said Marty.

"Perhaps. After all, isn't the impossible the ideal, the truly ideal? Still, my experience, my instinct alike tell me that you will find Russia no place for you, they tell me to warn you against going there."

"But what must I do?" cried Marty.

For a moment the Reverend Mother remained lost in thought. Then she roused herself from her reverie. "If I were to offer you a sphere of usefulness no further away from England than you are now, how would that content you?"

"Oh, yes, I should be thankful," said Marty.

"Then stop where you are—yes, stop where you are. You need go no further away from where you are now than into the various class-rooms and departments of this establishment. Stay with us. We are poor, we cannot give you much money; we can give you a home, we can give you consideration; we can give you work."

"What kind of work?" said Marty.

"You can read English with the advanced girls. You can do all manner of things for me. Oh, there are a thousand and one things. And we'll give you each term a honorarium which will show you that, though poor, we are grateful."

It was then that Marty broke down, and somehow found herself enfolded in the Reverend Mother's arms, and in imminent danger of being smothered by the saintly robes. Poor Marty! She struggled free in a few minutes, and sat up dabbing her eyes fiercely with a little cambric pocket-handkerchief. "I don't know what to say," she said. "You are too good, too

good. I'll do my best, madame. There's nothing I won't do. I'm a very useful person; I'll do anything that you tell me."

"Will you consult Monsieur l'Abbé? Will you confide in him?"

Marty drew back. "No, I would rather go by your instinct."

"My instinct is that you should confide in Monsieur l'Abbé."

"No, no, madame, not in any man. He wouldn't understand, and as he has never been married, he would understand less."

"His judgment would be less biassed."

"No, madame, no, not in Monsieur l'Abbé. I'll work for you, I'll slave for you. And you'll keep me safe here, you won't send me to do things in Paris, where I might be found out?"

Now, if the truth be told, Madame St Hilaire was just as foolish as Marty. If she had been as worldly-wise as she credited Monsieur l'Abbé with being, she would have consulted that good Father without any scruples such as having Marty's permission, and he, probably, being, as she had truly said, a man of the world, would have told her that the quickest and best way was to send Marty's description and the date of her arrival at Vitreuil to the London police. But Madame St Hilaire, in her reverend capacity as Mother of the Convent of Notre Dame de Providence at Vitreuil, never thought of such a thing.

And so Marty took up her new position as English teacher and general factotum to the establishment. She did not undertake all the English lessons, but she gave the dictations, she heard the readings, the

grammatical part of the course, and the translation from English into French, and from French into English, was done by those who had done it before, those who spoke both languages, otherwise chiefly by Madame Angelique. Then there were many little duties which she found for herself. Marty had a very pretty taste for millinery, and she turned it to account in this wise: all the children in the convent wore a particular kind of hat—I mean wore a hat of the same pattern—and these hats cost from fifteen to twenty francs a-piece. Marty suggested that if Madame St Hilaire would order a pattern hat, she would make the rest; and so she did. There were some bits of sewing to do, such as did not come within the scope of the ordinary needle-woman within the establishment; one or two girls were stricken down with the influenza, and then there was a slight outbreak of chicken-pox, and in all these emergencies Marty proved herself invaluable, for she was, as far as an untrained person could be, an excellent nurse.

So the cold and dreary winter days went by, and several times madame, when she was blue as to her finger-tips and red as to her ears, reminded her with a smile that this was mild and open weather compared to what she would have found in Russia and congratulated her on her common sense in having remained safely with them at Vitreuil.

If December and January had been severe, February was mild and open, and Marty spent all her leisure hours—and they were not many—in the great garden at the back of the convent. It was really her first introduction to Nature. All her life she had lived in London streets, excepting for

the two years that she had spent in a fashionable south-coast school. She knew little or nothing of times and seasons beyond as they were dictated by fashion; she knew less of budding and leafing, of the twitter of birds, and the signs of the sky, of soft winds that had come gently sweeping over the fresh-turned fields, or whistling and muttering through the pine woods. Indeed, the times when she was almost happy were the times that she spent in the garden, far enough away from the various class-rooms to be out of sound of the monotonous dirge of the children within. And then, just as February was drawing to a close, something happened to break the monotony of existence.

It happened that Marty had been exceedingly busy from the first to the second *déjeuner*. As a matter of fact, they were going to have a party in the convent, and she had offered to make certain cakes and sweets in anticipation thereof, consequently she had been exceedingly busy all the morning, and as she had no English work that day, she was glad when the second *déjeuner* was over to go out and breathe the air under the great elm trees in the farthest garden. Up and down she went, watching the rooks building in the tall trees overhead, listening to their discordant voices, wondering what they were saying to each other, wondering, with quaint fancy, whether they were cawing in French or English, or in a universal language common to birds whether in Kamschatka or Timbuctoo. And then Madame Angelique came running quickly along the laurel-bordered pathway which led from the house.

"Madame! Madame Johnson!" she cried. "Do please come in. There has been a terrible accident

outside. A motor car has been blown up—people killed — wounded — legs all over the roadway! Oh, terrible, terrible! And they are bringing them into the convent. Do come, I entreat of you, come!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

BROUGHT TOGETHER

MARTY ran panting to the *grande porte*. Already a dozen people had gathered in the roadway. The first object that struck her eye was the motor car, lying a hideous smashed heap on the other side of the road. Almost under it she could see the figure of a man in an oilskin coat; while a couple of men were carrying a lady, dressed in a long fur paletot, towards the door where she stood. Madame St Hilaire, white as a sheet, but preserving her nerve admirably, was directing them to carry her into the *parloir*. Her head was turned on one side, and moreover was enveloped with a thick gauze veil, so that Marty could not see her face.

"Quite unconscious," said Madame St Hilaire, "if not already dead. She never moved when they lifted her up."

Marty, who was a girl always good in an emergency, ran out to where the man in the oilskin coat was lying. "He is alive, madame," she said. "He is not dead."

"Then do two of you," said Madame St Hilaire, speaking to the onlookers, "carry him within doors. Has anyone already gone for the doctor?"

"Yes, two people for two doctors," was the ready

response. "Here, Jacques," the man continued, "you are bigger than I—take his head, I'll take his legs."

Unlike the lady, the poor fellow in the road uttered a deep groan as they raised him, and as Marty turned her attention to the prostrate figure under the motor car, the doctor who attended the convent came running up.

"Ah, very bad, very bad!" he exclaimed. "Poor fellow, these motor cars are so dangerous. Georges, pull that stick out of the hedge. Yes. Now then put it under the wheel—three or four of you raise all you know. Jean, you help me to draw him gently out."

In a moment the directions had been carried into effect, and the quiet figure which had been concealed by the motor car drawn into full view.

"All over," said the doctor; "quite dead. Oh, yes, better carry him into the convent. You won't object, madame?"

"Oh, but, monsieur, how could I object to anything?" said madame, raising her hands, palm outwards, to the level of her ears. "Not into the *parloir*, Georges Deval, not into the *parloir*. Better carry him through into the little room between the *parloir* and the chapel. Go round the other way—through the *refectoire*. No need to let the others see that he is dead. Such a shock!" she said to the doctor.

"Ah, madame, that is where you are so wise," responded the doctor. "Poor fellow! Does anyone know him?"

"But yes," said a voice from the crowd. "It is Marcel St Etienne, a *chauffeur* in the employ of Monsieur Martin."

"Of course, of course. So it is. I thought I knew

him, poor fellow. Now, madame, will you tell me where you have taken the others?"

The doctor turned and went into the house, accompanied by the Reverend Mother. Marty followed, eager and anxious to be of the smallest use. He turned his first attention to the man, who was lying on the floor groaning loudly. "Dear, dear, dear! Leg broken—arm broken. Ah, my man"—he turned round to one of the helpers who was standing by—"get me another doctor at once. Madame St Hilaire, where are these poor people to go?"

"We have plenty of rooms. They are ready now; we always keep rooms in readiness."

"Have you got an ironing-board?" asked the doctor.

"Yes, oh, yes."

"Send for it, will you, please?"

As the words left his lips a colleague arrived who had been found at a little distance. "Oh, is that you, Deschamps?" said the doctor. "I'm thankful to see you. I've just sent somebody off for another doctor if he could find him. Ugly accident. Poor Marcel St Etienne, you know, *chauffeur* at Martin's —dead as a door nail in the little room by the chapel. This poor fellow here has got a broken arm and a broken leg. Let us look at the lady while they get the board to carry him upstairs on."

The lady was still quite unconscious. "We can leave her very well where she is until we've attended to this poor soul," said Dr Chauncé. Now, Georges, my friend, put your strong hands under his shoulder —yes. Mind that leg, Deschamps. There, we've got it!"

The unfortunate man uttered a terrible groan, in spite of all their care, and the next minute a sad little procession wended its way through the entrance *cour* and up the stairs leading to the principal bedrooms.

"This way, this way, doctor," said Madame St Hilaire.

The Reverend Mother herself remained in the room while the doctors did all that was necessary to make the stranger comfortable.

"He looks like an Englishman," said Dr Chauncé to his colleague.

"Yes, his clothes look English."

"Now what about the lady, madame? You'll leave somebody here with him? I should like you to come with us; you'll be more useful than anyone else. Iron nerves, my dear lady, iron nerves, that is the best thing for a doctor; squeamishness and fainting fits and feminine weakness are terribly trying to us in an affair like this."

"I think," said madame, "I'll leave our little English lady to watch by him, since you think he is English."

So Marty was told by Dr Chauncé exactly what to do in case the patient awoke and required anything. "Above all things," said the doctor, "keep him quiet. Tell him his wife—or his sister—is not much the worse for her fall. Even if she's dead," he added, in a lower tone, "there's no need to let him know."

So Marty remained. She stood by the bed looking down at the poor victim to the march of modern times, wondering whether he was indeed a compatriot of hers or not. There was something

strangely familiar about him, and yet it was a face that she did not know. He was a tall man, dark and clean-shaven, and about thirty years of age. She glanced at his watch, which was lying on the table together with his purse and private papers. It was a handsome gold watch, and bore on the back a crest, a Latin motto, and the initials, "R. W. P."

"I never knew anybody with initials 'R. W. P.,'" said Marty, "yet I seem to know him. I feel as if I had seen him before." Then she bent down over the bed as the sick man stirred. "Do you want anything?" she asked in a very gentle voice.

"Where the devil am I?" was the reply.

"You are in the Convent of Notre Dame de Providence at Vitreuil," said Marty. "You are English?"

"Yes, I am English. Did—did I say something rude just now?"

"Oh, not at all. You have had an accident."

"Have I? I feel very stiff and queer. My wife—she was with me, wasn't she?"

"Yes, she's not much hurt. They are attending to her now. She's not nearly so much hurt as you were."

"Motor car did you say it was?"

"Yes, it was a motor car. It smashed up."

"I'm so thirsty," he said.

She raised his head a little and gave him a drink of the weak brandy and water ordered by the doctor.

"Ah, that's better. It's awfully weak, though."

"It's what the doctor has left for you. He'll come back and see you presently."

"What's the matter with my arm?"

"I'm afraid you have broken it," said Marty. "I wouldn't talk if I were you; the more quiet you can keep yourself the better."

"Oh, I must talk, madame. Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is—I'm called Johnson."

"I see. Well, Miss Johnson, I feel very shaky. I wish you would be kind enough to go and find out definitely how my wife is. Is she in the house?"

"Oh, yes, in the next room. I assure you you needn't worry about her. She's not as much hurt as you were; in fact, I don't think she was more than a little stunned, but I'll go and find out, just to set your mind at rest."

"Thank you so much," said he. "You are awfully kind. Since we've been smashed up and taken into a French convent, it's a comfort to find an English woman there too."

He turned his head wearily on one side and seemed to dose. Then Marty crept softly out and sought the room where they had carried the lady. She went in quietly. The doctors had completed their examination, and with the aid of Madame St Hilaire were just settling the patient, dressed in a nightgown of the tallest pupil of the establishment, in her bed.

"How is she?" asked Marty. "Her husband is very anxious to know. He is awake."

"There's nothing broken," said Dr Deschamps, "but she hasn't come to herself yet."

"What shall I tell him?"

"Well, I hardly know what to tell him. There may be internal injuries. We can't tell until she comes to herself. There's nothing broken. Better

say she's somewhat stunned and shaken. Did he tell you their name?"

"No; they are English."

"Yes, we thought so."

"How does she look?" said Marty, advancing softly towards the bed.

"Oh, as people always look in such a situation," replied the doctor, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"You'll get nurses in?"

"Nurses? Oh, it isn't necessary at present, but we'll see later in the day."

Dr Chauncé caught the words and turned round. "These people are evidently extremely well off," he said. "The lady has a number of very fine rings and several diamond brooches. Her watch," taking up a watch-bracelet from a table beside the bed, "has been badly smashed, but it is surrounded by fine diamonds and sapphires, three or four of which are missing. I don't know whether it would be worth anyone's while to go out and look for them in the road. From my not very wide experience of the English, I consider they expect to be nursed by professional nurses. The English are a practical nation," he added in a lower tone. "I think there's nothing like a good English nurse from that establishment in the Rue St Brieux."

Meantime, Marty had gone quite near to the bed. The lady was lying with her face turned away. She could see that the outline of the face was very pretty; a long fringe of dark eyelashes swept the rounded cheek; the nose was fine and small; the hair grew sweetly on the low brow; the ear was dainty and shell-like; the throat long and slender; the hand lying outside the coverlet was, as the doctor had

said, adorned with costly rings; and it was a white and delicate hand, well worthy of its adornments.

For a moment, Marty stood looking down upon her. Then some instinct made her turn and go round to the other side of the bed, where she could have a full view of the patient. In a moment she understood the strange feeling of familiarity that had puzzled her in the case of the husband, for the girl lying in the bed before her was George Etherington's sister—Mrs Dick Piers!

CHAPTER XXIX

SO FAR AND YET SO NEAR

When Marty realised that she had been brought suddenly, without a word of warning and without the possibility of retreat, into touch with her own life again, her legs fairly gave under her, and she sank down upon a chair by the bed wondering what in the world she should do next. There was no possibility of escape—none, none, none! She had remained on at the convent in order to fill a certain place, and the duties of that place were that she should lend a hand with any nursing that might have to be done in the establishment. Surely now that there were two of her own compatriots flung senseless at their door, she could not hold her hand for private reasons, she could not draw back and say that she was off her bargain. Would they know her? Certainly Dick Piers had not recognised her during the brief conversation which she had held with him. Perhaps they would never know her at all; perhaps George's sister had never noticed her on the one occasion that they had met in Hyde Park. She remembered, as if it had been but the previous day, the scorching glance of fine scorn with which the eyes of George's sister had travelled down from the crown of her head to the toes of her little shoes; but they had not especially lingered on her face.

She waited until Sister Angelique came to relieve her.

"You'll go to the English gentleman now," said Madame Angelique, "won't you?"

"I will in five minutes. I am not too comfortable in a sick-room like this. I must put on my apron, and just wash my face and hands. I won't be five minutes. Will you go to him if he calls?"

"Yes, yes, I will. She, poor thing, requires no nursing at present."

Once in the shelter of her own bedroom, Marty carried out the plan which she had already formed in her mind. She drew the hairpins out of the great loose knot of hair at the back of her head and let it fall in a rich rippling shower all over her shoulders. Then she took her stiffest brush and brushed up the whole of her crown of glory into a plain tight knob, brushing it well back from her face, and entirely altering its expression and almost the set of the features. For Marty had never worn a fringe. She had hair that curled naturally, and she had worn it simply loosely gathered about her head so as to make a frame for her piquant little face. Brushed tightly back, as if she were going into a bath, it must be owned that a great deal of her charm and attractiveness of appearance disappeared. Then she slipped on her blue serge gown, put a little white collar of French cambric at the throat, and tied round her one of the big-bibbed linen aprons which she had made herself for this purpose. "They'll think I'm an ordinary nurse," she said. Then, with a last shuddering look at her reflection in the glass, she turned and went back to the sick man's room.

"I have been alone for an hour," was his greeting as Marty entered,

"Oh, no, no, not for an hour. Not ten minutes."

"How is my wife?" he asked, not noticing her reply.

"She has not come to herself yet, but I don't think there's much the matter with her."

"I should like to go and see her."

"That is quite impossible," she declared. "It is as much as your life, and certainly mine, are worth, to let you stir one step out of that bed until the doctor gives you leave. You don't know how stern French doctors can be."

"Ah, yes, of course I'm in France. 'Pon my soul, I'd forgotten. They'll let me know as soon as there is something to tell about my wife, won't they?"

"Oh, yes. You mustn't worry yourself about her. She looks quite comfortable. I've just been in her room. She'll wake up presently, and I think you'll find there's not very much amiss with her. Meantime, you would like a little of this, wouldn't you? I'm sure you are thirsty."

"Oh, thanks, thanks." He lifted his head an inch or two, and she put the glass of milk and soda-water to his lips. "It's mighty poor tipple," he said, "but it's refreshing. Are you a nurse?"

"Yes, I am your nurse," she replied.

"You are English?"

"I am English, yes."

"What is your name?"

"I told you before I am called Johnson."

"Ah, yes. Surely, by the look of your hand, you are married?"

"I have been married," said Marty, wondering at her own marvellous self-control.

"Well, I'm very glad you happened to be somewhere about since we've got smashed up. Do you live in this village?"

"Yes, I've been living here for a long time."

"I see. I think, by-the-bye, nurse, that you had better write home." Marty's heart stood still again. "My people ought to know—my wife's people ought to know. They'll wonder what has happened to us. Somebody ought to let the people at the hotel in Paris know where we are. They'll think we've absconded, and they'll sell our trunks and things."

"Where were you staying?"

"Oh, we were at the Hotel St Jaimes. And if you would write home to my wife's people, I think that would be the best way. Perhaps—I wonder whether they'll think it necessary to come tearing after her? If you were to write to my wife's mother—"

"Yes," said Marty, "and her name is—?"

"Etherington. Mrs Etherington, No. 20 Portrush Villas, Kensington."

The ghost of a smile flickered over Marty's face to think that she, Marty Etherington, should be standing there by Dick Piers's bed, quietly listening while he instructed her in her own mother-in-law's name and address! But for her fear of being found out, her determination at any cost to herself to stick to what she believed to be the right course, Marty would have laughed aloud, shrieked with laughing, laughed till the tears stood in her eyes and even ran down her cheeks. But

all that Marty permitted herself to do was to smile that little thin ghost of a smile which Dick Piers never saw.

"I'll see that she's written to," she said reassuringly. "There's no need to write for several hours. The post has just gone. There won't be another until nine o'clock—not out of Vitreuil."

"Vitreuil? Is that the name of the place?"

"Yes. I'll see to it that your wife's mother is written to in time to catch that. It will be better to give her the latest news, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes, yes, nurse, certainly. You are perfectly right. By-the-bye, do you prefer to be called 'nurse' or 'Mrs Johnson'?"

"The name one goes by is no matter," said Marty. "Just use the most convenient and pleasing to yourself. I believe in invalids being coddled, and not worried over trifles."

"Well then I'll say 'nurse.' It comes more easily. I wish you would go into that room, wherever she is, and see how my wife is."

Full twenty times did Marty make a similar pilgrimage during the next two hours, and it was not until after six o'clock in the evening that Mrs Piers gave the smallest sign of returning consciousness. She first opened her eyes while Dr Chauncé was paying a visit, probably disturbed by the fact that he was feeling her pulse and otherwise quietly examining her. Marty was standing on the opposite side of the bed to him, and it was upon her that Mrs Piers first fixed her eyes after she had opened them.

"Where am I?" she said faintly.

"You are quite safe and among friends. You have

had an accident," said Marty, quietly. "This is the doctor with you now."

"Oh, who are you?"

"I am nursing you until another nurse comes," said Marty, passing her hand across her eyes.

"I see. Where's — where's Dick — my husband? Was he hurt? I—can't remember anything."

"Yes, he was hurt, but he's been quite himself, as far as his head was concerned, for hours. You needn't worry about him. He can't come to see you because he's broken his leg. The doctor wants to make a little closer examination of you and see whether you are hurt at all."

"Oh, yes. But you are sure Dick isn't in danger?"

"Oh, dear, no. Just a clean break. Nothing you need worry about, only it keeps him in his bed. Can you turn over?"

"I don't know."

"Well, try."

Marty rapidly communicated what she had said to the doctor, who immediately asked the English lady if she understood French. She did, but it was not the French of one who has lived in France, and the doctor's English was not the kind of English of one who has lived in England. Between the two he naturally reverted to interpretation by means of Marty.

"Ask the lady if she can turn herself over," he said.

No, she could not turn herself in bed. She seemed to have no power. She felt no pain anywhere, only light in her head—disagreeably light in her head. Was the doctor quite sure that her husband was not in danger?

"Madame may make herself perfectly content on that point," said Dr Chauncé. "Now, Madame Johnson, let us see if we cannot turn madame over a little, and let me look at her back. I want to make quite sure that the ribs are all right."

Finally he declared that nothing was broken, and nothing seriously injured; that madame must be content to lie perfectly quiet in her bed for the next few days. "Not so long as your husband will have to lie until his broken leg is mended," he said kindly enough. "And madame must take everything that her nurses offer her in the way of nourishment, and, above all things, she must not worry about anything at all."

Then Marty, having given Mrs Piers some good strong *bouillon*, and made her promise to lie still and try to sleep, went off to tell Dick Piers the good news.

"You'll write to her mother, won't you?" he said when he had heard what Marty had to tell him.

"Her mother shall be written to, certainly," said Marty. "I'll wait until half-past eight. The post-box is in the wall of the convent, so you need be under no apprehension about that."

"And you are sure she is not seriously hurt, nurse?"

"I am as sure as I can be of anything. She is stunned. The doctor wants her to lie still, but he told her she would not have to lie as long as you will."

"And you'll send up to the hotel?"

"Yes, yes, we'll send up this evening. Shall I tell them to keep your things there or to send them down here?"

"I think they had better send them down here," said he. "Goodness knows how long we may be kept prisoners."

"Well, you needn't worry about that," said Marty. "There is one comfort about a convent, and that is that you won't stay too long for them."

CHAPTER XXX

A DIFFICULT PATIENT

It was just eight o'clock when the English nurse arrived from Paris. Marty was summoned to receive her, she having been the one left in charge of the two patients by Dr Chauncé. The nurse was a tall, capable young woman, with an alert, brisk manner. She scrutinised Marty with a keen professional eye.

"Surely you are not a nurse?" she said.

Marty laughed deprecatingly. "No, nurse, I am not exactly a nurse, but I have made myself into the best imitation of one that I could until your arrival to take the cases and the responsibility off my hands."

"Bad cases? Accident? or what?"

"An accident," Marty replied. "A motor car smashed up just at the door here, and the *chauffeur* was killed outright—dead as a door-nail. The lady and gentleman are pretty smashed about; he with broken arm and leg, she in pain—apparently nothing broken—stunned sort of feeling, and the doctor is afraid some injury to the spine. Both very anxious about each other. Before you go to see them, I want you to write home to the lady's mother."

"I? Why don't you write?"

"I'd rather not. Look here, nurse, can I speak to you in confidence—strict confidence?"

"Why, of course. By the way, do you mind telling me your name?"

"I'm called Johnson," said Marty.

"Miss Johnson?"

"*Mrs* Johnson," corrected Marty.

"Oh, really. You look so absurdly young to be married."

"I am not very old," said Marty. "You are Nurse Vincent, I see," glancing at the paper in her hand.

"Yes, that is my name. I came out of queer old-world Cornwall, trained three years and a half in London, then I came straight to Paris, and here I have been for the last seven years. Well, what were you going to tell me?"

"I only tell you," said Marty, "because I have got to, and if you don't keep counsel—"

"Oh, I shall keep counsel. A nurse with ten years' experience knows how to hold her tongue."

"Well, I happen to know some of these people. I don't want to be the one to write home."

"I see."

"Though I don't know this lady and gentleman—I never met them—I do know her mother, and she would know my handwriting. I don't want her to know that I am here."

"Very well. Shall I write now? What time does the post go out?"

"In an hour. If you will come into my room I'll tell you what I want you to say."

"All right," said the nurse. "You just dictate it to me and it will be all right."

So Marty led the way to her own room and established the newcomer at her own little writing-

table. She sat down on the other side of it and dictated the letter which would carry home the news of the motor accident to Mrs Piers's relations.

"DEAR MADAM,"—it ran,—"I regret to have to inform you that early this afternoon your daughter and son-in-law, Mrs and Mrs Piers, met with a serious motor car accident just at the door of this convent. The *chauffeur* was killed outright. Mr Piers has sustained a broken arm and leg, and Mrs Piers is badly stunned. She regained consciousness after some time, and both desire that you should be written to, but beg that you will not think it necessary to come unless we should advise you to do so by telegram later on. You may be sure, madam, that they are in good hands with the good Sisters who conduct this house. Two doctors have been in attendance, and I have just arrived from Paris to take charge of the cases. There is also a young English lady staying in the house who will assist me, and, if necessary, another nurse will be procured from Paris, but we do not anticipate that the necessity for this will arise.—I am, dear Madam, faithfully yours,

"HELEN VINCENT,
"*Nurse.*"

"Now, nurse," said Marty, "while you are arranging your things and rigging yourself up I'll trot down and put this in the letter-box, and then that will be off my mind. I know both of them will say at once when they see me, 'Have you written home?'"

Ten minutes after this Nurse Vincent was introduced to the rooms of her respective patients. Marty took her to see Dick Piers first.

"Good evening, nurse," he said. "Find me tied by the leg literally."

"Yes, I've heard about it," said Nurse Vincent, cheerfully. "But nowadays a broken leg isn't very much. They'll have you walking about on crutches in a week or so. I suppose it was only a simple fracture?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. It hurt confoundedly putting up into this concern," nodding towards the cage on the bed.

"Ah, well, you must be very patient. I'll do my best for you. You'll find me a very nice, cheerful nurse, and it will soon be all right. You are young and strong; young bones mend quickly. And now I'm going to see Mrs Piers."

"Tell me exactly what you think of her," said he.

"Oh, yes, exactly what I think of her," returned the nurse.

"Will you really?" said Marty, as she closed the door of the room behind her.

"My goodness, no! If I think she's got nothing the matter with her I'll tell him so. If I think she has, I'll make light of it. I don't worry patients with a couple of broken limbs, my dear lady. If I didn't know when and how to tell the truth I should think myself a poor kind of a nurse."

"I know nothing about it. I never nursed anybody in my life except an old servant who had the influenza."

"That's not much qualification," remarked the nurse, with a laugh.

Then Marty opened the door of Mrs Piers's room and motioned the nurse to pass in. The patient there was half asleep—that is to say, she had been asleep for

a short time and had waked up a little inclined to be fretful.

"Who is that?" she asked. "Oh, is that you, Mrs Johnston? Who is that with you?"

"It is the nurse come to take charge of your case."

"I don't want a nurse. You can do quite well for me."

"No, no," said Marty. "I was quite well able to take charge until somebody better could be got, but remember your husband has a broken leg to think of, and although the doctors don't think much of a broken leg nowadays, it wouldn't do to have no nurse to look after it, would it?"

"Oh, no. I didn't mean to be disagreeable, nurse, but there's nothing the matter with me at all. I am only so bumped, and I feel so—well, I feel so played out. I don't really think there's anything the matter with me at all."

"You had just a bad shaking, from what Mrs Johnson tells me," said the nurse, quietly. "And a very nasty thing, too. I wouldn't worry about getting up for a day or two. Let me take care of you and look after you, and you'll soon be yourself again."

"Have you written home?" said Mrs Piers, looking at Marty.

"Yes, yes; it's all right. I posted the letter ten minutes ago."

"That's all right. Did you tell them not to come?"

"I told your mother that your wish and that of your husband was that she shouldn't come, and that I would advise her by telegram if there were any change for the worse."

"Thank you. I suppose I ought to want my mother to come now that we've got smashed up, but it would be bothering her for nothing, and we are in good hands. Thank you so much for writing."

She turned her head on her pillow with an evident desire to finish the conversation. The nurse put one or two things straight and began to busy herself about the room.

During the days that followed Nurse Vincent was a good deal puzzled. So was the doctor. The morning after the accident they made a very close examination of Mrs Piers's back, feeling and prodding and tapping her spine along its entire length.

"Now try and turn yourself over," he said to her.

"I can't."

"Try. Make an effort. Explain to madame," he said to Nurse Vincent.

"The doctor want's you to try and lift yourself a little."

"No," said Effie, "I am quite powerless. The doctor knows that as well as I do. I've broken my back."

Nurse Vincent translated her words to the doctor. "Madame has certainly not broken her back," he said positively, "or in any way badly injured it. She has been badly stunned, and the spine has been jarred but there is no serious injury, of that I am certain. I would stake my entire reputation upon it."

"What does he say?" said Effie. She understood most of his remarks, but it suited her to have their exact meaning translated.

"He says you have not broken your back, or in any way seriously injured it. You have jarred yourself, that is all."

"Tell madame," went on the doctor, "that it would be just as well if she remains perfectly quiet for a few days, until her husband is beginning to move about again. Then we shall have to exercise her, and get her to make an effort to move and help herself a little."

"It's no use talking to me," said Effie, when this was translated to her. "I can't make an effort. I can't help myself. Why is the man so foolish?"

"What does madame say?" asked the doctor, who did not understand.

"Madame is unreasonable. Madame is a little petulant," said Nurse Vincent.

"I see. Well, we won't worry her at present. Later on she will be more amenable to reason and see the necessity of helping herself, perhaps."

"You don't really think that she has injured her spine?" said the nurse to him in the corridor, as they were passing from one room to the other.

"No, I am sure she hasn't. She's a hysterical subject, and she's making the most of it. I believe she could get up and move about as well as you or I if she chose to."

"She was unconscious for some hours?"

"Yes, she had a certain shock, but she's making the most of it—purely hysterical. You'll follow out all my directions and feed her up well. Be very cheerful, and, above all things, stop her mother coming here. She'll do her no good, and she may do her a great deal of harm. That nature wants bracing, not coddling."

When they entered Dick Piers's room they found Marty sitting by the bed reading an English newspaper to him.

"Ah, you are having a little reading?" said the doctor.

"Oh, yes, the time is so long. I want Mrs Johnson to play patience or piquet with me."

"I can't play piquet," said Marty. "I never had sufficient brains to play anything but patience and beggar-my-neighbour."

"That would be a change. I say, doctor, how is my wife this morning?"

"She ails very little, far less than you do—very little indeed. A little hysterical—I don't mean weepy, or anything of that kind, but a little inclined to hysteria."

"It's not her nature."

"Perhaps not. She's had a nasty jar. I've told her to lie still where she is. And as for you, you won't have to be patient for many days longer. So do, my good sir, try to bear it without worrying as to madame or your affairs, or even the news of the world."

"You have set me a hard task, doctor," said Dick Piers.

"Yes, yes. I have more difficulty in getting my patients to undergo a rest-cure than any other cure on earth," replied Dr Chauncé.

CHAPTER XXXI

AMENITIES

Two weeks dragged slowly by. They were weeks full of weariness, both of mind and body. Marty passed all her days, excepting the hour when she gave an English lesson, between the two sick-rooms, assuring first the husband and then the wife that the other was not dangerously damaged.

Fortunately for her, Mrs Piers was able to write her own letters. True, in deference to the wishes of the doctors, she only wrote to her mother, using a blotting-pad and a pencil. She was decidedly the better from the shock of her fall, and could now turn herself in her bed, but was not yet allowed to sit up, being only propped up on a rest for a few minutes when taking her meals.

It was a proud day for Marty when she escorted Dick Piers into his wife's room; not on his own legs, poor fellow, for he could not, with a broken arm, use crutches, but superintending his being carried there on a narrow couch which would easily pass through the doors.

"Now," she said, "I'll go down and make you quite a smart little afternoon tea with my own tea-things, and you shall have it together. You can reach the bell, can't you, Mrs Piers, if you want anything?"

Then she went away, leaving them alone together.

There was much to say, much to talk of and discuss, and the two were happily chatting when Marty came back, bringing all the accessories for giving them a dainty little meal.

It was very curious, but Marty had utterly forgotten that there was any chance of either Dick Piers or his wife being cognisant of her identity. Sister Angelique had noticed the severity of the new style in which she was wearing her hair, and Marty had told her carelessly that she had a reason for it.

"English people, you know, Madame Angelique," she said, "are very queer. They expect a nurse to have her hair scragged back as if it were rather a sin than otherwise to possess it, and I thought I should inspire confidence by making myself look as much like a nurse as possible. Really," she went on, "it's much less trouble than wearing it all fluffed about one's face, and I don't know that I am not quite as attractive as I am."

Sister Angelique had still a weakness for things of the world, and although her own braids were modestly tucked away beneath a linen *coif*, she loved to see a round young face like Marty's framed in a halo of shining hair. So she shook her head over Marty's new rule, and said plaintively that she had thought the old style of things very nice.

Well, as I said, Marty had come to look upon herself as quite a different entity to herself, and she was now absolutely at her ease, both with Mr and Mrs Dick Piers.

She came into the room like a sunbeam. "Now, you two poor invalids," she said, "I am going to give you the nicest little tea that you have had since you left London. Yes, I know you can get it in

Paris at one of the little creameries in the Rue de la Paix, but it's not like the tea that I am going to give you."

And then she set it all out, so as to be as enticing as possible, and Dick Piers was profuse in his expressions of gratitude.

"So awfully kind of Mrs Johnson, isn't it, Effie?" he cried, turning to his wife.

"Oh, Mrs Johnson *is* kind," said she. "I don't know what we should have done without her. Really, Mrs Johnson, it was providential that you were here. Think if we had been cast on this foreign shore, in a barren house where scarcely a soul speaks a word of English!"

"Sister Angelique speaks English," said Marty.

"Sister Angelique? Yes, yes, she does, I know; but somehow I can't get used to having these white-capped Sisters about me. When they make a joke it positively seems to curdle my blood."

"Oh, how funny!" Marty cried. "They are full of joke, they are the gayest of the gay, like great overgrown babies."

"You know them very well—you have been here a long time?" said Mrs Piers, in a tone that was only half-questioning.

"Yes, I have been here for ages," Marty answered.

"It can't have been such great ages. You are very young."

"I look very young," said Marty. "I think I am about a thousand years old. I have lost count long ago."

"You'll become a Sister yourself, perhaps?"

"Never! I am not even a Catholic."

"You might turn Catholic."

"I might. I couldn't say."

"They don't make any effort one way or another?"

"Oh, no, that's not their line. They are very kind, very nice, very gay. They say they have given up the world. I have been once or twice to make calls with them when they wanted to arrange about English lessons and so on, and then they mightn't take a cup of tea or a sweetmeat; and if they land in the middle of a party, they get quickly through their business and go, having given up the world. But they have a world of their own; they have their jokes, their little jealousies, their amusements, their duties—everything but husbands. I don't know that anybody need pity those in Sisterhoods so much."

"I don't know that I've thought about them sufficiently to pity them, or the reverse," said Mrs Piers. "Yes, just a little more cream, thank you, Mrs Johnson. This tea is excellent. You made it yourself!"

"I made it under your nose," said Marty, smiling. "I had some difficulty to get the cream. You know they prefer it sour in France. It was quite a favour, because you are such invalids."

"I'm sure," said Mrs Piers, "it is very good of them."

Then Marty brought little delicate crescents of bread, buttered with beautiful cool fresh butter, and tempted them both to eat.

"Do you ever go to England, Mrs Johnson?" said Mrs Piers, suddenly.

"To England?" said Marty, with a start. "Oh, I left England for good and all long ago. All my ties are in France. I shall never leave France unless I am obliged."

"Obliged! What would oblige you?"

"There might be war between France and England. If I had not taken out letters of naturalisation—which I should hardly do, and I don't know even whether a woman can—"

"Or married a Frenchman," put in Dick.

"I shall never do that," said Marty. "But I might be requested to leave within so many hours, you understand. Otherwise, I shall remain in France for the rest of my life—at least, I think so now. Why? What makes you ask?"

"I don't know. Idle thoughts — conjectures — vulgar curiosity. You seem so young to be here among these elderly nuns."

"They are not all elderly. You haven't seen them. There's one girl, only two-and-twenty, and she's beautiful."

"And yet she's a nun!"

"Yes, she's a nun. Hers is a pitiful story. She was in love with a man that she had known since she was a little child. There was not much *dot* for her; there was no fortune for him; as yet, he was in a very small position. Her sister had the chance of making a very good marriage provided that a certain *dot* was forthcoming. To marry the one sister it was necessary to sacrifice the other, so they married Marcelle to a man that she knew nothing of, and they sacrificed Claire, who had been in love all her life. They say it works well. Claire accepts it as her fate; she says she's happier doing her duty; and Marcelle is a person of some importance at Lyons. They say it works."

"It's horrible!" cried Dick Piers, "absolutely barbarous!"

"You are tired, Mrs Piers," said Marty. "Let me give you another cup of tea and then take the rest away."

"Yes, I would like another cup of tea, thank you, Mrs Johnson." She was looking very pale, her face showed signs of pain and distress.

"It's barbarous!" Dick Piers went on. "One wonders that men and women will allow themselves —those that are young and strong and lusty—to be treated like dumb driven cattle. Can't understand it myself. It wouldn't work with us."

"It's all a lottery," said Marty. "How many marriages are spoiled in England by people who interfere, people's relations, those who make it their business to rule the roost. They say it works here."

"You think relations interfere with us?"

"I don't think about it," said Marty; "I know it."

"Perhaps they may be right," said Mrs Piers from among her pillows.

"Oh, perhaps. But it seems to me that marriage is a purely personal concern; it seems to me that it has nothing to do with anyone excepting the two most concerned."

"Then," said Dick, "the more necessary that the two most concerned should be the only ones that are consulted."

"They don't consult here, so I'm told."

"Evidently, from your story of Sister Claire."

"No, they certainly don't consult very much in this country as to likes and dislikes. There was a girl who was educated in this convent. She was betrothed, when she was not quite eighteen, to the eldest son of a great merchant — a very large im-

portant merchant a few miles away. He disliked her; she had no feeling for him. He was rich; she was the eldest daughter of an exceedingly wealthy man. The young couple protested against the marriage, especially the boy, but the arrangements went on, like the laws of the Medes and Persians; and when at last they brought them to the Mairie for the civil ceremony, the bridegroom struck. He declined to be married, he protested that he had always wanted to marry a pretty girl, and that he wasn't going to be tied up to a creature like that. 'See the thing that you would have me tie myself to!' he cried, with tears in his eyes. It took the parents three-quarters of an hour to bring him into a rational frame of mind."

"What do you mean by a rational frame of mind?"

"To get him to consent to be married. And they were married."

"But the girl!" cried Dick.

"Oh, the girl had no choice. She was not consulted. She was told that she was going to marry Monsieur Gustave Vernet on such a day; that was enough for her."

"Do you think that marriage is likely to turn out well?"

"It doesn't seem so, to our ideas. But they say it works. I don't know."

"It's monstrous!" cried Dick. "Oh, think how different it is with us! How men and women will give up everything—*everything* for love pure and simple."

"They are not always," said Marty, "left alone to reap the fruits of their sacrifice. You have

the family interest coming in. A good many hearts are sacrificed, even with our free system of marriage, on the altar of family interest. I," she added impressively, "have known such a case myself."

CHAPTER XXXII

A GOOD IDEA

"I THINK now," said Marty, looking at the little clock which ticked upon the dressing-table, "I think I'll leave you for a little talk together, for I have a lesson to give."

"At five o'clock?" said Dick. "Oh, come, Mrs Johnson, that won't do. Nobody gives lessons after five o'clock."

"Indeed, yes. I'm not joking. I'm not quite an idle woman."

"Oh, I appreciate your delicacy of mind. You want to leave us to talk things over by ourselves, but it's not really necessary. My wife would rather you stayed, wouldn't you, Effie?"

"I don't see why I should drive Mrs Johnson away," said Effie, in rather a chill tone. "We are not exactly *fiancé*, you know."

Dick Piers lay back and laughed as if it were the best joke he had ever heard in his life. "Oh, that's funny, isn't it? Not exactly *fiancé*. Ah, that's the best joke you've made for a long time! But seriously, Mrs Johnson, don't clear yourself out of our road."

"I must," said Marty, smiling. "I have a lesson to give."

"Not at five o'clock."

"Yes. You see the convent goes on until dinner-time."

"Not really! What, seven o'clock?"

"Yes. They come at seven in the morning, and they go away at seven at night—not all, you know, but some—and I have a class of six girls, very advanced pupils, to whom I give a lesson in English reading and dictation at five o'clock every Wednesday afternoon of my life; and as it is now just five minutes to five, I must, reluctantly it is true, bid you adieu."

"Oh, if it's like that, of course there's not another word to say."

"It's just like that," said Marty.

"Poor little thing," said Dick Piers to his wife, when Marty had departed, "I didn't want her to hurry away, because I fancy it's a bit of a treat to her to chat with English people."

"There are English girls here, you know, Dick," said Effie, turning her head on her pillows and looking curiously at her husband.

"Yes, English girls, but they are schoolgirls. That's not like association with one's own sort."

"I hope you don't put us down as Mrs Johnson's sort."

"Why not?"

"Ah, well, it's hardly necessary to explain."

"Why not?"

"She's not our equal."

"I'm not so sure about that," said he.

"Oh, no, my dear, no. She's a dear little woman—"

"And she's a damn good nurse, too! I know she's been as good as gold to me, bringing me news of you, and saying everything she could to keep my heart up,

telling me just how you looked, and how pretty you were, and—and—oh, she's a little brick!"

"Yes, Dick, dear, I know. Goodness knows we are beholden to her in every sense of the word, but that doesn't quite make her our equal, does it?"

"Oh, I can't go into your ideas. You were always a little beyond me in that respect, Effie."

"Was I? I don't think so. I haven't any wish to be beyond you, Dick. I was going to ask you—we can't pay Mrs Johnson for what she's done for us, because she's here not as a nurse exactly, but we shall have to make some recognition of her having nursed us and been good to us, and stuck to us day and night, and all that."

"Oh, yes."

"What shall we do?"

"I notice," said Dick, "that she doesn't wear a scrap of jewellery. Supposing we gave her a watch? Every woman likes a watch; a nice little gold thing with her initials—one that will go."

"Yes, that's rather a nice idea, Dick," said Mrs Piers, with a change of tone. "Has the doctor given you any idea how long we shall have to stop here?"

"No, he hasn't certainly spoken of the possibility of our going away. It's a bore, of course, but it might be much worse."

"Oh, I don't see that. These tiresome nuns with their hideous white caps and their horrid long veils, they do bore me so. And nurse's ideas are bounded by Bartholomew's Hospital and Paris."

"A fairly wide field," said Dick.

"Oh, yes; but it's out of my line. I don't know Paris, not intimately—probably never shall, don't

particularly want—and I don't take the smallest interest in Bartholomew's Hospital."

"Then there's the little woman."

"Ye—s. I haven't much in common with the little woman," said she. "Nice little thing, very kind and very worthy, and all that, but still she's not interesting; and even if she were, I think one would get very sick of it. It's so dreary all day long lying on one's back with nothing to do. I've a good mind to ask mother to come."

"Your mother? Oh, that's a very good idea. I wonder if old Georgie could get a few days' leave?"

"Georgie?" said Effie, sharply, "Georgie, did you say? Oh, no, he'd never leave London just now. Oh, dear no! This place would bore him to death in his present state. On second thoughts, I won't ask mother to come. It would be a horrid bore for her, and why should she be bored? It wouldn't help me the least little bit in the world; if one is smashed up a bit one needn't be selfish."

She had, however, unwittingly put an idea into her husband's mind. "Mrs Johnson," he said, an hour or two later, when Marty came into his room during the time set apart for Nurse Vincent to go down and get her supper, "Mrs Johnson, will you write a letter for me?"

"A letter?" she said, doubtfully. "Oh, not to-night. Nurse will be up in a minute. She's been in bed, and she's been out; she'll be fresh."

"Oh, all right. I want to write to a friend to-night. I have two or three letters I really want to write."

"I would with pleasure," said Marty, "only I am

so jaded. Nurse won't be many minutes. The post goes out at half-past eleven."

"Oh, thanks."

She took his writing-case off the dressing-table where it was lying, and brought it to the side of the bed. "See," she said, "here are all the paraphernalia that you need."

"I believe," said Dick, "that you are ashamed of your hand-writing."

"I am," said Marty. "What makes you think that?"

"Because you have never written a letter for me yet."

"No, I do write a poor fist, I admit. Really, Mr Piers, Nurse Vincent is much more credit to the establishment than I am."

"I don't know," said Dick Piers, "that I wouldn't rather have you write my letters, whatever your fist is like. I wonder if I shall ever see it."

"You are not likely," said Marty.

"I don't mean to lose sight of you when we're patched up and gone away."

"Oh, nonsense, you don't take the least interest in me, beyond what everybody would feel who has been ill, especially after an accident the recovery from which is tedious. Once you are out and about, and strong and well again, you'll forget me as if you had never set eyes on me. I'm sure," she added fervently, "I hope so."

"I call that a very unkind remark," said Dick Piers. "If I had been horrid, or haughty, or made love to you, it would be rather different, but I have been an exceptionally good patient, and very grateful for everything that you have done for me."

"Oh, yes, you are a model patient; much more so than your wife."

"Oh, is my wife a bad patient?"

"Not a very good one, I must admit it—very difficult at times—but then, of course, she's had a jar to the system, and a jar to the system is a very nasty thing to get over. There, I'm going to leave you now, Mr Piers—good-night!"

"Oh, good-night!" said he, rather shortly.

Marty was smiling broadly as she reached the door. "I wonder what he would say if he knew the truth. I wonder if he would be himself, or whether he would be as haughty and disagreeable as she is. Oh, to think that she can be my Georgie's own sister, positively the same flesh and blood. His mother was kind enough to me; his father was charming. She—she's so rude at times, I could almost believe that she knew the truth. And yet she's just the same to the others. Why, the Reverend Mother herself, who was born one of the greatest ladies in France, asked me only yesterday whether all English ladies were as chilly and unapproachable as Madame Piers. And to think she's my Georgie's own sister!"

At the end of the corridor she met Nurse Vincent coming up from her supper. "All as usual?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, nurse. Mrs Piers is a little inclined to be fractious, but she does get tired of lying there."

"Oh, poor thing, yes! I don't wonder. I should hate it myself. And she's young, and not been married very long. It was very hard lines to get smashed up like that."

"Of course it was," said Marty, heartily. "And after a little while she'll be about again and just her

old self, and then she can go away home and be quite happy."

"Yes, yes," said the nurse, easily.

So Marty went away, and Nurse Vincent turned into Dick Piers's room. "Well, and how is Mr Piers to-night?" she asked.

"He's much better, thank you, nurse. He wants a letter written—nothing else. You can go and attend to madam, or do whatever you like after that, and come back whenever you think proper and just give me a look."

"Is it a long letter?" asked the nurse.

"Oh, no. 'My dear George,'" he began dictating, "'Effie and I are both on the mend—excellently nursed (nurse is writing this letter for me, so I am obliged to say so!), and we are beginning to think that some day we may get home again. My dear old chap, this is a charming little place from all I hear (haven't seen it myself yet), and I want you to come out and spend a few days. It would cheer Effie up; she is beginning to get home-sick, and I am absolutely useless up to the present. Just send a wire, George, old fellow, and say you'll come. Your affectionate brother-in-law, Dick.' Address it to George Etherington, Esq., No. 28 Rosediamond Road, West Kensington, London, W."

The letter was soon finished, the envelope directed, closed and stamped. "You'll put that in the box now, won't you?" he said.

"I'll put it in at once, before I go into your wife's room. I think it's a very good idea. You both want something to cheer you up a little. You know your wife is much better."

"Oh, yes, I know she's better. Yes, yes, she'll be

better still after a time. It's been very hard lines for her, poor girl, to be stuck in that room on her back—she, a healthy young woman that's never ailed anything since I have known her. I'm sure if she had some of her own people about her it would be better for her."

"Oh, much better. I think it's an excellent idea. I'll run and post the letter now."

So nurse whisked out of the room, as much as a nurse ever does whisk, and in the corridor almost ran against Marty.

"Hullo, nurse? Whither away in such a hurry?" she asked.

"I'm going to run down to the post-box."

"What, have you been writing that letter?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me," said Marty, "I'll put it in the box."

So nurse gave the letter up to Marty, and Marty ran lightly down the stairs. As she reached the *cour* between the *grande porte* and the kitchen door she paused under the lamplight to look at the address:—"George Etherington, Esq.," she read, "28 Rose-diamond Road."

CHAPTER XXXIII

AN INVITATION

For full five minutes Marty stood staring at the letter, then she turned and went swiftly down the wide flight of brick steps to the *grande porte.* The letter-box was but three or four feet outside the door, and for a moment she stood irresolute; then she imprinted a kiss on the envelope, just where Georgie's fingers would open it.

"Think of my posting a letter to you!" she said, looking up at the sky. "Think of it! Think of it! Oh, Georgie, Georgie!" Then she kissed the letter again and dropped it in the box.

"Now I shall have to watch the post," she said to herself as she ascended the steps again. "I shall have to watch. If he comes, I must have a sore throat, or I must go away for a few days. I must. I must be out of sight."

It was three days later that Marty happened to pass through the inner *cour* just as the postman put a batch of letters into the hand of the *femme de chambre.*

"Any for me, Camille?" said Marty.

"I don't know, mademoiselle, I don't know." She turned them over in her hand. "Reverend Mother," she said, putting it down upon the table which stood beside the kitchen door, "Reverend Mother—that's

number two — Sœur Angelique — Madame Piers — perhaps you'll take that upstairs, mademoiselle?"

"Yes," said Marty.

"Two more for the Reverend Mother," the maid went on, "one, two, three, four, five, for the young ladies—one for Monsieur Piers."

Marty held out her hand and waited, without looking at the letter, until the maid had gone through the batch. Then she said, "That's all right. I'll take these upstairs, Camille."

As she went up the stairs she ventured to look at the missive for Mr Piers. Yes, it was in the well-beloved and well-remembered handwriting. "Is he coming?" said Marty to herself. "Is he coming?"

She carried the letter straight upstairs to Mrs Piers's room. She knew that her husband had been carried in there half an hour before. "A letter for each of you," she said, in her pleasantest voice; and what an effort it was to make that voice pleasant nobody but Marty herself knew; "one for Mrs Piers, one for Mr Piers."

"Thanks so much," said Mrs Piers, in her *trainant* and rather haughty voice.

"Thank you, Mrs Johnson, thanks," said Dick. Then he tore his open and uttered an exclamation. "Damn!" he said.

"What's the matter?" asked his wife.

"Oh, nothing, nothing. I wrote to George and asked him to come over for a few days."

"To come here?" said Mrs Piers.

"Yes. I thought you would be the better for a little visit from some of your own people, and poor old George must be moping in London, and—er —I thought it would be a little change for me

and a pleasure for you. I wanted to surprise you with it."

"And he won't come?"

"He says he can't possibly leave London—very kind, sends his love and all that, but quite impossible to leave London at present."

"I could have told you that," said Mrs Piers, quietly.

Marty had gone to the fireplace, where she was busy putting chunks of wood and lumps of a kind of peat into the open grille which served as a grate.

"I could have told you he wouldn't come," said Effie.

So he wasn't coming! "I can leave you now for a time, until tea, that is to say," said Marty, rising from her knees.

"Oh, yes."

"Oh, yes," they cried in a breath.

"I've got a lot of things to do this afternoon, so I'll bid you good-bye for the present."

She went out, unaware of the fact that Mrs Piers's eyes had followed her with a curious strained expression until she disappeared through the doorway.

"Dick, dear," she said presently, "it was awfully kind of you to write and ask Georgie, but you know it wasn't likely that he would come over and see me, however ill I might be."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't admire his choice—in short, I objected to it. George hasn't forgiven me for not tumbling over myself in order to worship the ground his little wife trod on."

"Poor chap, that's all gone by."

"Is it? Do you think so? What do you mean by gone by'?"

"Well, it was an experiment that failed."

"But George blames us."

"Oh, no. His letter is as nice as a letter can be."

"George isn't a barbarian," said Effie. "He replies to a cordial invitation with decent civility, I have no doubt."

'Well, read the letter for yourself."

Mrs Piers stretched out her hand and took the letter, glanced over it and laid it down on the bed again. "Yes. He doesn't mean coming, all the same. Poor George! So promising, and so good-looking, and such chances, and then to hash everything for a girl out of a second-hand clothes' shop. It's pitiful! And to be heart-broken because she's done only what he might have expected—pitiful! But it wasn't likely that he would come, knowing—at least, feeling just what I feel. I wouldn't ask any of the others over here, Dick, if I were you. I think they would be very uncomfortable. You don't know what the meals are like downstairs, and they wouldn't have very good accommodation in a place like this outside the convent, and it's a long way down from Paris; horrid time of the year, too, so cold. It's all very well for us, but I don't think I'd run the risk of asking anyone else. We sha'n't be here long now. Did the doctor say anything to you about being able to move?"

"He grumped a little, and said I was very well where I was, but with a little pressing admitted that I might be able to go home in a couple of weeks more."

"Well, I don't think it would hurt you."

"No, I think he is more concerned about you than about me at present."

"I sat up this morning by myself. I shall be about in a day or two—in a way, you know."

"Oh, I hope so. It's dreadful to have you laid up like this. I don't think we'll motor any more, Effie."

"No, I don't think we will; not in a French motor anyway. By-the-bye, Dick," she said, "it's a very curious thing, France seems to be fatal to our family."

"Why, how do you mean?"

"Oh, it was something that happened while they were in France that made that girl run away from Georgie."

"You don't say so!"

"Mother told me just before we left home. George blames France for everything."

"Well, we can't help blaming France for being smashed up like this, that's certain."

When Marty reappeared in order to make their tea, the letter was lying on the floor between the bed and the couch. The girl's quick eye saw it in an instant, and when she went to give Mrs Piers her tea, or rather when she went to lay the little table across her bed on which she set out all her meals, she pushed the letter a little under the bed with her foot.

So the time passed until the two men arrived to carry Dick Piers back to his own room, and then Marty took the first opportunity of picking up the letter and smuggling it into her pocket. She felt that it was in a sense dishonourable, since the letter had not been written to her, but in truth she was hungering so intensely for some touch with her beloved that minor considerations of honour went to the winds.

When she got to her own room again she took it out and read it.

"My dear Dick,"—George wrote,—"It is extremely good of you to ask me to come over and see you and Effie. I am very glad to hear that you are both mending. I wouldn't go to France again if I were you, it's a beastly unlucky country. Thanks awfully for your invitation, but I can't leave London. I might be wanted at any moment, you see, and I shouldn't like to be out of the road if I were. A thousand thanks. I am all right. I hope you and Effie will soon be the same.—I am always, Your affectionate brother-in-law,

"George Etherington."

In the privacy of her own room Marty broke down and wept, but she never for one moment considered the question of giving up her scheme and going back again. Not that she would not; it was not a parallel case with the heart of Pharaoh so hardened by misfortune, not at all. At all and at any cost Marty was determined to carry out the sacrifice of self, and to benefit George in the long run, even though her very life paid the penalty.

Later in the evening she slipped the letter back from where she had taken it, just under the wooden side-piece of Mrs Piers's bed, and then she busied herself about the room, talking with great cheerfulness the while.

"Have you got a headache, Mrs Johnson?" said Mrs Piers, suddenly, when Marty came near the bed.

"No, I never have headaches," said Marty.

"Don't you? You are lucky. I thought you had. You look as if you had been crying."

"Do I? I think one often looks like that. There's not much to cry over here. One knows exactly what to expect when one gets up in the morning; one realises that one has had one's deserts when one is going to bed at night."

"Wretchedly dull life," said the invalid.

"Oh, yes, wretchedly dull. And yet it has interest."

"You have your occupation, you have things to do. I never found a few days hang so tediously in my life."

"You have been here three weeks," said Marty.

"Yes, I know. It seems like three years. I don't believe my people will know me when I get back again."

"No?"

"I have people, you know, although none of them have come. I wrote them not to."

"Yes, I know you did. You told me the first night that you were here."

"Yes. I think I might have had my mother. She's a person full of resource, who I think has never been bored in her life. She never ricked her back at the door of a French convent, though."

"No, no, you have had a very trying time," said Marty.

"I ought to have wanted my mother to come, and my mother did want to come, but I thought she would hate it."

"I'm sure she would."

"What are the meals like downstairs?"

"I don't think that they would like the meals," said Marty, evasively.

"No, I thought not. I had a talk to the doctor just now. He thinks we may be going home in a very short time. I think I shall take Nurse Vincent with me."

"I should if I were you," said Marty. "I think it's a very wise idea. She would save you so much fatigue on the journey."

"Yes, I think I shall take her with me. I like Nurse Vincent; she's an admirable person."

"An excellent nurse," said Marty.

"Yes. All the same, we should have been badly off if you hadn't been here. Well, of course we should have had to have a second nurse, and she might not have been nice. We—my husband and I —we are very grateful to you."

"Don't say that," said Marty. "I was only too glad to do any little thing that I could."

"Yes. Well, a little thing to you was a lot to us, you know, under the circumstances. I suppose," she went on deliberately, "that even if they would spare you from here you wouldn't like to go to England with us instead of Nurse Vincent?"

CHAPTER XXXIV

A SILVER FRAME

When Mrs Piers put the question to Marty—Would she like to go to England or not?—Marty's very heart seemed to turn to water within her. For a few minutes she positively could not speak, could not trust herself to utter a single word.

"Perhaps you don't want to go to England?" persisted the invalid.

Marty drew a long breath. "No, Mrs Piers," she said, making a great effort to speak in natural accents, "I never mean to go to England again."

"You were unhappy there?"

"Yes, I had been very unhappy in England—I haven't been altogether happy in France, but it's less pain to me to live here than it would be among those I know."

"You came from London?"

"It doesn't matter where I came from. I—I've left it all. I had a trouble. Please don't ask me about it; it's too painful a subject to talk over."

"Oh, forgive me, Mrs Johnson," said the invalid, speaking in quite a sympathetic tone. "I am very sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I only put the suggestion to you thinking that possibly it might suit your purpose to return. Forgive me, I'll not hint at the matter again."

So nothing more was said between them.

The winter days crept slowly over. Dick Piers began to get about again, and Mrs Piers to sit up each day for a few hours in a large armchair. Then they were able to while away the time by playing *écarté* and patience and such-like amusements for two people. And then Dick Piers got his wife to write to Paris, and a jeweller's assistant came down bringing them some watches to see. They chose a plain gold watch, very good as to its works, severely plain and simple as to its outside. On this they had engraved an elaborate monogram—"E. J.," with the date; and it was eventually presented to Marty, with a nice little speech from Dick, and a few words in addition from his wife.

Marty took it, choked over it, uttered a few incoherent words of thanks, and fled to the sanctuary of her own chamber. There she flung herself upon her knees by her bed, and laughed and laughed and laughed until the outburst ended in a flood of tears.

"E. J.!—E. J.!—E. J.!" she cried hysterically. "My new monogram! Oh, Georgie, Georgie! To think!—oh, Georgie! E. J.—Elizabeth Johnson! They don't know—they little know. Oh, Georgie!"

She did not go into the room again that night, and when she did once more take up her duties—now very light indeed—she was not wearing the new watch.

"Won't you wear your new watch, Mrs Johnson?" said Dick.

"Oh, thank you very much, thank you, I won't wear it whilst I'm working about. There's always the time right in front of me as long as I am here.

I'll wait till I'm outside the convent, and then I'll wear it."

"You like it?"

"Oh, yes! It was so kind of you—too kind. It wasn't necessary to give me anything; or if you wanted to give me something, you needn't have given me anything so handsome as that. But it was kind."

"It wasn't half good enough for you," said Dick. "We thought perhaps you wouldn't care to have one looking much smarter."

"I shouldn't," said Marty, "I shouldn't."

And then there came a day when the two invalids, escorted by Nurse Vincent, were able to make the journey to Paris. Dick Piers was not exactly himself again; he would have to use the greatest care for some months. As for Effie, she had made rapid strides towards recovery during the few days that had gone by, but she was still looking very pale, and was decidedly nervous.

There was a great leave-taking as they left the convent for ever. Marty was the last to say good-bye to them.

"I hate leaving that little woman behind," said Dick, as they drove away through the little town and over the bridge.

"You hate leaving her?" said Effie, in a tone of consternation.

"I don't mean in that way. She's so awfully young to be so sad. There's some tragedy behind that life. It's dreadful to think a mere girl should be overshadowed by a tragedy."

"How do you know that she is? It may be mere mannerism."

"There's no mannerism about it. That little girl is dying of a broken heart."

"Oh, nonsense! How romantic you are, Dick."

"Perhaps," said Dick, "perhaps. All the same, I feel that we ought to have done something for her more than a mere present."

"I did try," said Effie. "I asked her if she'd rather go back with us instead of nurse."

"Instead of Nurse Vincent?" said Dick.

Nurse Vincent, I may say, was following them in a carriage with the extra luggage.

"Yes, instead of Nurse Vincent. She told me that she had been very unhappy in England; she never wanted to see it again. She said she had not been happy in France, but, at all events, it was better than England. So make your mind easy, my dear Dick; you don't know the girl's whole story. It's no use judging on half evidence; that never did any good in this world. Our meeting with her was like that book you were reading not so long ago—*Ships that pass in the Night*. We've passed in the night; we shall probably never see her again. Put her out of your head, my dear boy; it never pays to take up other people's burdens; they themselves don't even thank you."

"Some people never try," said Dick.

"No, I agree with you there. And those that do seldom get any thanks for it. Put the girl out of your mind—right out of your mind."

They stayed that night in Paris, going on the following day to London, where they arrived at their own house in Kensington thoroughly tired out, but extremely happy to find themselves at home again. Mrs Etherington was there to receive them, and the

colonel and George came in later on. They did not remain very long, for as soon as they had had a bit of dinner, Nurse Vincent insisted upon their going to bed, so that George, who only came in after dinner, saw them but for a few minutes.

"How do you think Georgie is looking?" asked Mrs Etherington of Dick, Effie having gone upstairs with nurse.

"I think he's looking ghastly. Poor chap, he quite made my heart stand still."

"Ah," said she, "poor Georgie. I'm afraid he'll never get over it."

"There's no trace?"

"Not the slightest clue. I believe she deliberately went down to London Bridge and dropped herself over the edge. I didn't tell him so; it's better he should hope unless there's direct evidence that he need hope no more."

"I don't know," said Dick, thoughtfully. "They say 'Hope deferred maketh the heart sick.'"

"Yes, there's for and against; but I don't see the good of tormenting him with mere supposition."

"Poor Georgie! You rather liked her, didn't you, Mrs Etherington?"

"I liked the child well enough. She wasn't what I should have chosen—I never pretended it—but if he felt as he did, and does, for her, likes or dislikes of mine have but little to do with it. You see how broken-down he is because of losing her."

"Yes, yes, poor chap." He was silent for a moment, then he spoke again. "I never saw her, you know, Mrs Etherington. I think Effie did once; I never saw her."

"Ah, I'll show you her portrait when you come to see me."

Then nurse came back and promptly ordered her second patient to bed, and Mrs Etherington and the colonel bade him good-night, and they walked quietly on to their own home.

For a few days nothing particular happened. The invalids kept very quiet, only receiving a few visitors who would not be denied. Then Effie announced her intention of going round to have tea with her mother.

"I'll go with you as far as the door," said nurse.

"Oh, I don't think that's necessary."

"I think I'd better, the first time that you have been out. You might feel faint."

"Oh, well. And you can come for me about half-past six."

They walked slowly round to her mother's house, and Effie went in, nurse leaving her at the door. Her mother was in the drawing-room waiting to receive her.

"My darling child!" she said. "I am so delighted to welcome you home again after all your many troubles. Sit here, darling. Let me loosen your furs. You look very nice, you know, Effie, in spite of your delicate air."

She fussed about her a little, and settled her in her own favourite chair. Then she ministered to her, giving her fragrant tea and delicate hot cakes.

"You have got a new frame there," said Effie, suddenly.

"Ah, yes, poor George brought me that. Poor boy!"

"Any news of the errant lady?"

"No news," said Mrs Etherington, with a sigh, "no news. I think he's beginning to give up hope."

"Dick asked him to come out to us for a couple of days."

"He told me—yes, he told me. He wouldn't be away from town for fear any news came."

"How foolish!" said Effie, curling her lip a little disdainfully. "As if a wire wouldn't reach him in a very short time after news arrived here! Is that the missing lady?" pointing to the photograph.

"That is poor little Marty, yes."

"Marty do you call her?"

"I call her by her name, Effie," said Mrs Etherington, faintly reproachful.

"Yes? Let me look at it."

It was an ordinary cabinet-size photograph of Marty, taken just before she was married; Marty with her rich brown hair arranged loosely and carelessly about her happy face, her dress of soft white silk and chiffon disclosing her slender throat and rounded arms.

"She's an ugly little thing," said Effie.

"Oh, no; not ugly. It's a sweet face."

"I didn't know you thought so. Well, since she chose to run away, perhaps it's just as well to glorify her."

"How did you think Georgie was looking?" asked her mother, ignoring the latter remark.

"I thought he was looking very wretched. It's very weak-minded of him."

"Wouldn't you be wretched if Dick disappeared suddenly?"

"Yes, but Dick's different. She doesn't want to come back."

"Oh, don't say that!"

"No, mother, that girl went away for her own purposes. She's no desire to come back. If she had she would come. There's nothing to stop her. She's

entirely free, and her own mistress. Don't tell me that a girl went away from a man because she thought she had done him harm by marrying him. That's all nonsense. There aren't any such girls. The girl was disappointed in George, or that the family didn't take her up enough; it was some personal reason that took her away, not because she wanted to benefit George by cutting herself off from him for ever. It won't wash, mother; it won't wash."

"I've thought out all that," said Mrs Etherington. "I've thought it all out. I've read that poor little last letter a hundred times. I believe," she said, "I believe that she put herself in the river."

"Very possibly," said Effie, "but I shouldn't have thought so myself."

CHAPTER XXXV

NURSE VINCENT'S SUSPICIONS

For a long time Mrs Piers sat without speaking—sat, indeed, with her eyes closed. When at length she opened them Mrs Etherington congratulated her on having had a pleasant little nap.

"I haven't been to sleep," said Effie.

"Oh, haven't you? I quite thought you had been asleep. I almost held my breath lest I should waken you. You'll soon pull up again now, dear girl. Plenty of good feeding, plenty of careful exercise; no shocks, no disagreeables, and you will soon be quite yourself again."

"Oh, yes, I daresay I shall."

"How much longer is your nurse going to stay with you?"

"Well, only until Dick's arm is free of the bandages; and it isn't fit to be set free yet, nor, for the matter of that, is his leg. I suppose she'll stay another fortnight."

"You like her?"

"I like her very much indeed. She's an excellent nurse, and she's interesting because she knows Paris so well."

"The other nurse you had—"

"We had no other nurse, mother," said Effie.

"Oh, I thought there was a Mrs Johnson?"

"Yes, dear; but Mrs Johnson was not a nurse. She was a young English lady staying in the convent. She taught English, but not enough to call her the English governess. I fancy it was a kind of mutual arrangement."

"I see. A widow?"

"I really couldn't say."

"Young?"

"Oh, yes, quite young."

"And a good nurse?"

"Excellent nurse for an amateur. And she was on the spot, you see. She was very good when we were first taken in."

"It's a mercy you weren't killed," said Mrs Etherington.

"The *chauffeur* was killed," said Effie. "Dear mother, I have had enough of motoring to last the rest of my life. I might some day go in an electric, but never in another petrol."

"How was it you didn't bring Mrs Johnson?"

"I did ask her to come. She wouldn't. I don't know that she would have been as all-round good as Nurse Vincent, who is an excellent person in every way. By-the-bye, she's coming for me presently. You see, this is the first time that I have been out walking."

"Yes, yes. I think you are most wise to take every care. Besides, what is the use of having a nurse if she doesn't do something for you. I suppose she dresses you?"

"Well, not very much," said Effie. "You see, Firth has always been accustomed to maid me, and Dick wants a good deal of help, so I don't see the

use of taking Firth off her regular work—I believe she's there!"

Mrs Etherington moved forward to the door as the voice of the nurse sounded without. Effie, quick as thought, seized the photograph of Marty in its smart silver frame, and thrust it behind a larger picture, not so quickly, though, but that Nurse Vincent saw the little manœuvre from where she stood in the hall.

"Come in, nurse, come in," said Mrs Etherington, in her well-bred voice. "Mrs Piers isn't the least tired, are you, Effie?"

"Not the least, mother, thank you. Well, nurse, have you been looking in the shop windows?"

"Yes, thank you, Mrs Piers. I have been up to High Street, seen all the shops, had a cup of tea at Derry & Toms', went up in the lift — done myself thoroughly, thank you."

"You'd like to come and see your father before you go, wouldn't you, Effie?" said Mrs Etherington.

"Oh, yes, mother, I should like to see Dad. We sha'n't be more than a minute or two, nurse," she added, turning to Nurse Vincent.

"Well, don't overdo yourself," was the nurse's reply. "You know," she added, speaking to Mrs Etherington, "Mrs Piers has made a great effort, and this is the first time she's been out. I've always believed in the truth of the old saying, 'Creep before you walk.' It's worth its weight in gold in illness, especially illness of a nervous kind."

"Oh, I'll bear it in mind, nurse," Mrs Etherington cried. "Come, Effie, just a word with your father."

As the door closed behind them, Nurse Vincent walked quietly across to the inlaid bureau, on the

top of which were large and small photographs in silver frames. She thrust her hand behind the large photograph of a young man in immaculate London clothes, who was looking at her with a pleasant, half-quizzical expression of face, and drew into view a massive silver frame which was lying face down, turned it to the light, and saw—Mrs Johnson!

She looked at the photograph long and earnestly. "Well, that's queer," she said to herself. "H'm! I thought when we were at Vitreuil that there was something on my lady's mind. I was certain of it. I couldn't get at the truth of it, try as I would, but I was certain of it. Now, how shall I find out? Memo.: Is there anything to find out? It's funny. Is Mrs Johnson a relation of the family? I see Mrs Johnson at the convent at Vitreuil; I am struck that there is something between her and the accidents; I meet her in the house of the accident's mother—that is, I find Mrs Johnson's portrait in a lovely silver frame, and I see Mrs Piers thrust it away so that I sha'n't get a glance at it. Is it a poor relation? Were they ashamed of it? It's funny. And yet she told me she'd asked her to come here instead of me. H'm! Johnson!"

She slipped the photograph back and walked to the fireplace, where she sat down in an easy chair and assumed an attitude of extreme comfort. In a few minutes back came the mother and daughter. Nurse Vincent, a woman, mind you, accustomed to noticing small things, noticed in a moment the swift glance which her patient cast at the bureau with its freight of silver-framed photographs.

Mrs Piers breathed a sigh of relief as they reached the street.

"You are tired, Mrs Piers?" said nurse. "Do take hold of my arm."

"Oh, I will, thank you, nurse, but I'm not really tired; at least, I'm healthily tired. It was a great effort coming home again the first time after such a smash up as I've had."

"I'm sure it was. And you have no sisters, have you?"

"No, no sister."

"That must make you more precious to your mother."

"Oh, I don't know. I don't think my mother made any difference between myself and my brothers."

"You have brothers?" said nurse, with polite interest.

"Yes, I have three brothers. You saw one of them, didn't you? That was my eldest brother."

"Yes, yes, I saw him. Mind that step! You must be very careful not to jar yourself for the next few months."

"You think I shall get strong again, don't you, nurse?"

"Oh, yes. Only you must take care."

They were soon back again at home, and Nurse Vincent, having seen Mrs Piers straight to her bedroom and helped Firth to put her into a comfortable tea-gown, administered her medicine to her and told her to sit there quietly until dinner was ready.

"Nothing like little rests in between times when you have had a jar or a shock to the nerves. Where people make such a mistake," nurse went on, "is that they think when they get about again that they are to work full time, and the ill-used nervous system refuses absolutely to fall in with that idea. Work an

hour and rest half an hour, and your nervous system is very well pleased and satisfied with itself, and gets through its work very nicely. Do please bear that in mind, and when I've gone back, keep it in mind for the next year or two."

She carefully talked herself out of the room, and went off in search of her other patient, who was every day now getting nearer to the time when he would be beyond her care.

That night Nurse Vincent made an excuse to get the housemaid into her bedroom. It was a flimsy excuse, and she took still flimsier means to win the girl into a talkative mood.

"You'll excuse my saying so, Fludgate," she remarked, "but you have not been very well some time during the last two years."

"Had a dreadful illness two years ago," said Fludgate.

"Typhoid?" said nurse.

"Yes. How do you know that?"

"Oh, we nurses know a thing or two. And you are beginning to get over it as far as your strength goes?"

"Oh, yes; I'm nearly all right again. But how do you know?"

"Well, your hair," said nurse.

The maid put her hand up directly. "Now there! And you can tell that, though I frizz it up to be as much like it used to be as I can?"

"Ah, but you used to have a head of hair like a thatch," said nurse.

The maid nodded her head. "Never had any hair since I had that typhoid."

"I'll mix you up a bottle of stuff to-morrow that will make your hair like a thatch again," said nurse.

"Use it every night for a month, and every other night for another month, and every third night for a month more, and you'll have a head like the thatch you wish to have."

"That's exceedingly kind of you," said Fludgate, gratefully. "My young man said to me—you know, the young man I walk out with—he said to me only the other day, 'Why, Annie Maria, I can't think what's come to you of late. You've got a bald look!' I always had the greatest horror of bald people," Fludgate went on.

"You won't be bald after I've doctored you," said nurse. "And whilst I'm about it, I'll mix you up a bottle of stuff for your hands. Rub it on every night when you go to bed, and your hands will be nice and viewly."

"I'm sure that's good of you, nurse. I ought to have hands as right as a trivet, for it's an easy enough place; but I've a very delicate skin, and you see I wash up of a night as a rule, because cook is very good-natured in some ways, and so I'm good-natured in helping her to wash up, and somehow my hands—well, look at them!"

"Oh, I'll put that all right," said nurse, easily. "I should think it was a light place."

"Oh, yes. Nothing like a young couple with no family to give the servants a good time."

"I should quite think so," said Nurse Vincent. "They seem a very nice couple."

"Oh, very nice. But, of course, they're not like themselves just now. They are generally as gay as gay, and out every night; and missus out every day to tea except when she's got people coming, and everything is as easy as you please."

"Is it a large family?" said nurse.

"No. Master has one or two married sisters."

"Is one of them a Mrs Johnson?" nurse asked.

"Johnson? No, never heard of anybody connected with them called Johnson. Never heard of anybody come to the house called Johnson."

"Oh, really?"

"You see, master and missus is rather by way of being a bit uppish. She was an Etherington, and he's a Piers; and his uncle is a baronet, and her mother come of a very swell family. They've no common names among 'em. It's seldom I hear of an ordinary name coming inside the doors. As to Johnson, well, I never did hear of it in connection with them at all."

"Oh, I fancied there was a relationship, that was all," said Nurse Vincent, quietly.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A LITTLE OUTING

When you come to think of it, it is extremely difficult to find out things in this world. It is difficult to prove; it is quite as difficult to disprove. Take a woman in the position of Nurse Vincent. It was exceedingly difficult for her to prosecute any inquiries concerning the fact that she had seen Mrs Johnson's photograph in Mrs Etherington's drawing-room. Twice Mr Piers had visits from his married sisters, once when two came together, and another time when one came by herself. On both occasions nurse saw them, was kindly spoken to, and complimented on the excellent condition of her patients, but it was not possible for her to say, "Madam, did you ever hear of a Mrs Johnson? Have you anybody connected with you who bears that name?" Once she went round to Mrs Etherington's house with a message from Mrs Piers asking her mother to send her some trifle or other. Mrs Etherington did not happen to be at home, but the parlour-maid told her that she would certainly not be many minutes; she was expecting her back very shortly. So nurse was shown into the drawing-room, and the maid remained—perhaps by way of setting her at her ease—to talk to her; said what a terrible thing it was that Mr and Mrs Piers should have come to grief with a motor car,

and gradually nurse with great care worked round to the fact, ever present in her mind, that Mrs Johnson's photograph stood upon the bureau.

"That's a pretty-looking young lady," she said, pointing carelessly towards the counterfeit presentment of Marty. "Is that one of the family?"

"I don't know," said the parlour-maid. "You see, I've only been here six weeks. I don't know who it is. And the cook, she's been here just a week less than I have; and the housemaid, she only came a fortnight since."

"Dear me! Does Mrs Etherington often change?"

"Not a bit of it. But all her servants got married, so she had to make a clean start. They arranged their leavings so that one should put the other a little in the way of things. The last one that left got married yesterday. Oh, they've all been here for years. It's a very good place—very easy; only the master and missus and two young gentlemen. Master and missus are very gay for old people."

"Should you call Mrs Etherington old?"

"No, not old—very gay."

"So you don't know who that is?"

"No, I don't know who anybody is. I haven't had time to find out. What makes you ask?"

"Oh, I fancied I saw her when I was here the other day."

"Why don't you ask Mrs Piers?"

"Yes, I might do that," said nurse.

But nurse never did ask Mrs Piers. On the contrary, frustrated on all hands, she returned to Paris without having solved the mystery of the charming photograph in the silver frame which stood upon the bureau in Mrs Etherington's drawing-room.

Now Nurse Vincent was one of those people who hate to be beaten. That was probably why she made such an excellent nurse. She knew not the meaning of the word defeat. Although she had really tried, in a round-about, ladylike kind of way, to get at the mystery of that particular photograph, she had by no means given up the search.

As soon as she returned to Paris she was sent out to a serious case at one of the hotels—if you want to be exact, it was the Continental—and from thence the patient was removed to a nursing home at Passy. Here she was kept for six weeks, and then she had a couple of days free to herself.

Her first outing was, like that of so many English-women in Paris, to the Bon Marché in search of certain articles of feminine attire. Her next excursion was to the Convent of Notre Dame de Providence at Vitreuil.

"I want you to come up and spend the day with me in Paris," she said when Marty went into the room to her.

"In Paris?" echoed Marty.

"Yes. Come up by the next train, and we'll have lunch together."

"But why did you come down? Why didn't you write?"

"Ah, I thought if I didn't come you wouldn't perhaps come. You have a lesson? Oh, nonsense! I'll go and talk to the Reverend Mother. I'll give her news and messages and things from the patients at Kensington. Shall I find her in her sitting-room?"

"Yes, I believe you will."

"Well, now, you go and get ready as soon as you

can, and I'll arrange about the lesson. You can give it to-morrow, can't you?"

"I could," said Marty.

So Nurse Vincent went bustling off to the little sanctum of the Reverend Mother, and in ten minutes had arranged that Marty might be spared to spend the rest of the day with her in Paris. Then the two went off together.

"You have got your hair different," said nurse, suddenly.

"No," said Marty.

"Oh, yes."

"My hair?"

"Yes, your hair. You had it all scragged back anyhow when I last saw you."

"Ah, yes; I thought it was more proper for nursing."

"Oh, did you? H'm! I like you better with it loose like that. You look very nice — very nice. Now what shall we do with ourselves? We'll have a nice little luncheon at a little restaurant I know where you get ripping meals quite for next to nothing. You are my guest, you know."

"No, no," said Marty.

"Oh, yes, yes. I've got lots to tell you. I had a great time in London. They were very kind to me. Of course, they didn't ail much. Madame had a few nerves; monsieur had not."

"And madame and monsieur are better?" said Marty.

"Oh, they are marvellously better. Why, here we are at the Gare! What a quick run we have had! That shows how talking will pass the time. Now, get into this omnibus here, and it will land

us at the door of the restaurant that I was telling you about. If you have ever eaten a better lunch for less than ten shillings, I'll eat you."

Marty laughed. "Very little in the way of food contents me," she said.

"I like my food," said Nurse Vincent. "I never pretend, I never sham, never humbug; I like my food. I always feel when I have an extra good dinner that the labourer is worthy of his hire. I work very hard, and I always feel that I am worth good food."

"Did the Pierses feed you well?"

"Excellently. She runs the house very well, that young lady. She's selfish, and in some ways she's hard, but she understands how many beans make five, and she understands how to order a dinner and how to govern a household."

"Nice servants?"

"Oh, yes; very nice indeed. By the way, such a funny thing happened."

"Yes?"

"Her mother, Mrs Etherington—you know her, don't you?"

"I!" exclaimed Marty.

"I saw your photograph there, that's all."

"At Mrs Etherington's? I never gave her my photograph," said Marty, all in a hurry.

"Didn't you? Then somebody else did. It's in a lovely silver frame, and it stands on a bureau to the right of the fireplace as you go into the room."

"Yes?" Marty's heart was beating to suffocation, but her tone was distinctly suggestive of the want of further information.

"Yes. I wasn't quite sure," said Nurse Vincent. "I didn't know—ah, here we are at our restaurant! Now, my dear, we haven't taken very long to get here, have we? I'll give you some *bisqué* soup. If you have ever eaten anything like it, I'll eat you."

"I'm sure you will," said Marty. "Don't consider me. Order what you like. I eat everything."

"Ah, you are a very sensible girl. People are very tiresome — patients particularly — who have fads; can't touch mutton, loathe rice, never eat cheese, can't bear anything from the inside, like everything frizzled to a cinder, and think most sauces are disgusting! I once had a patient," she went on, "who couldn't touch beef-tea. I was always getting beef-tea smuggled into him as it were under other guises. I used to give it him in his chocolate, and then when his taste came back he found the chocolate wasn't quite right. I'd given him beef-tea in all sorts of ways, but as he got better and stronger he got up to all of them. He was a patient and a half!"

They ensconced themselves at a little table near the door, whence they could watch the traffic in the street, the gay Parisian street, now under the early summer sun so attractive, so full of life, what the French themselves call *le mouvement.* Not another word did either say on the subject which was uppermost in the hearts of both until they had reached the course which consisted of a spoonful of *petits pois.*

"Then you do know Mrs Etherington?" asked nurse.

"Yes. I told you so before."

"And you did know Mrs Piers?"

"No, I didn't."

"Mrs Piers knew you!"

"Mrs Piers knew me!" Marty blanched to her very lips. "How do you know?"

"Because the first time that she went to see her mother I went to walk home with her, for she was still very shaky. Her mother came out to receive me in a very grand, kind sort of way, and over her shoulder, as I shook her hand, I saw Mrs Piers hide something behind one of the photograph frames. Then the two went in to see the father, and I went to see what there was behind—natural curiosity. It was very foolish of me, but I did it."

"Yes? What was hidden?"

"There, face down, was your photograph."

"I never gave it to Mrs Etherington," said Marty.

"I can't help it. It was a photograph of you in a white dress, made very prettily, sweetly draped, and your hair loose as I had never seen it—very *tres bien soigné*, as they say here. The frame was a massive silver one, *repoussé* work; it must have cost two or three guineas. In spite of the difference in dress I knew it in a moment. I went three or four times, but somehow that photograph was always on its face. I tried to find out about it. The servants at Mrs Etherington's are all new."

"All new!" echoed Marty.

"They've all got married—all three of them."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Marty.

"And Mrs Piers's servants knew nothing," went on

nurse. "His sisters came two or three times, and her mother came over and over again. I couldn't say to them, 'Do you know a Mrs Johnson?' I couldn't find out."

"Why did you want to find out?"

"I don't know; sheer curiosity. It seemed so queer to me that Mrs Piers should have been your patient here, that you should have cared for her, mothered her, done everything for her and him, that she should have asked you to go to England with her before she asked me, and yet that you should pretend that you didn't know each other."

"We didn't know each other."

"But that you should pretend there was no connection between you."

"How do you know that there is?"

"I don't; but there's something. You know her mother. She didn't want me to mention you in her mother's presence, so she hid your photograph. I thought you'd like to know. My dear, I don't want to do you any harm, you are a mere child compared to me, a baby. Something has gone wrong in your life. My dear girl, do you think that I should have gone down to Vitreuil to-day, on the very first holiday that I have had, to seek you out and bring you up here, if I didn't think I was going to help you to unravel the tangle in your life? What do you take me for?"

CHAPTER XXXVII

A BRIGHT THOUGHT

For a little while Marty sat staring at Nurse Vincent in utter silence.

"Nurse," she said at last, "I know you mean well—"

"Mean well? Of course?"

"I don't know that I'm much better for that."

"Now what is it?" said nurse. "Come, you had best confide in me. Something has gone grievously wrong."

"Yes," said Marty, "you are right there. Something has gone grievously wrong with me, but I don't think you could put it right, well as you mean."

"Tell me about it," said Nurse Vincent.

"Not everything; no, I can't tell you everything."

"My dear girl," said Nurse Vincent, "there is one golden rule of life—never have a secret from your lawyer or your doctor; anybody who has lived will tell you the same thing. To-day I stand in the place of your lawyer and your doctor. Tell me the whole story. What is Mrs Piers to you? Why was she so anxious that I shouldn't speak of you to her mother?"

"You think she was?"

"Well, she was at great pains to thrust your photo-

graph out of sight whenever I happened to be expected in Mrs Etherington's drawing-room."

"I can't think where Mrs Etherington got it," said Marty.

"Well, that doesn't matter; that won't help you. She's got it, and it's in a very lovely silver frame. But that's not the question. The question is—Why did Mrs Piers not want her mother to know that you were at Vitreuil?"

"I suppose," said Marty, slowly and heavily, "I suppose because Mrs Etherington is looking for me."

"Looking for you! Why should she be looking for you? Have you done anything that has upset her, that—?"

"I don't know," said Marty. "She might be looking for me because—because she's interested in me."

"But why is she interested in you?"

"How should I know? I didn't know that she was much interested in me," said Marty, in a miserable attempt to fence the main question.

"It doesn't strike me," said Nurse Vincent, "that Mrs Piers was at all the kind of woman to think of you in the matter."

"I don't suppose she did," said Marty. For a moment she had felt an almost irresistible temptation to confide the entire truth to her companion. Then some subtle instinct came over her, and she resolutely put the idea away from her. "I can't explain it all to you, nurse," she said. "It's awfully kind of you. I'll never forget it. I don't know why you should be so kind to me as to take any trouble or bother, or to think about it at all, but, all the same, you may take it from me that you can't do anything to smooth

out that particular tangle. I didn't know that Mrs Piers recognised me. I never met her. I am, in a way, connected with her, but I never spoke to her in my life until we met in the convent at Vitreuil. I never want to see her again. If she knew me, and she's keeping silent as to my whereabouts, she's doing me the greatest service that one woman can do another."

For a moment Nurse Vincent's heart seemed to turn to water within her. Then she leant over the little table and caught Marty's two little soft hands in hers. "You are a child," she said. "You have cut yourself off from your friends, I don't know why, nor how, nor when."

"Why should you trouble?" said Marty, her lips beginning to quiver.

"Because you have got a look on your face that no young girl ought to have. They think at the convent you are anything under thirty; you don't deceive a nurse like me, I, with a Bart.'s training, I, with London and Paris experience. You haven't seen your twentieth birthday yet, Mrs Johnson, and your heart's breaking. Why is it breaking? If Mrs Etherington is looking for you why do you let her look in vain?"

"I can't explain it to you," cried Marty, in distress. "I'd rather keep my own counsel. It's awfully kind of you, I sha'n't forget it to the day of my death, but you can't help me. I don't want Mrs Etherington to find me; I don't want anybody to find me. I want to stay where I am until I die."

"Nonsense!"

"Sometimes I wish it were nonsense," said Marty. "Sometimes I wish I were dead, that I had never

been born, that I had never known what it is to love and suffer and lose. But what's the good of wishing? Life is what it is. One can't put back the clock."

"There was a poet once," said Nurse Vincent, looking hard out of the window, "who wrote, 'Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all.'"

"I don't agree with him," said Marty; "no, I don't agree with him. Happy those who have never known what it is to lose."

"Well," said Nurse Vincent, briskly, "I didn't bring you out to make you miserable. Now you'll have some coffee—black coffee—and a liqueur? And then—have you been to the Louvre? I don't mean the dress place, I mean the galleries."

"No, I've never been to the Louvre," said Marty.

"And the Hotel des Invalides? And we might go up the Tour Eiffel. We'll make a regular day of it."

They did make a regular day of it, and Marty saw more of Paris than she had seen during all the months that she had been at Vitreuil. And then Nurse Vincent took her back as far as the Gare, and there they parted.

"Now you'll remember my address, Mrs Johnson?" said she, as she was saying good-bye. "If ever you change your mind, and you want me, just write to me, or come. If I'm out nursing they'll let you know where I am. And remember that I sha'n't be happy until I know you are happy. I feel somehow as if I had been sent to you."

The tears welled up into Marty's eyes, and her voice shook as she thanked her, but that was all. She was firm and resolute; she had put her hand to the plough, there should be no looking back.

So they parted, and Marty went back and took up the tenor of her dull and uninteresting life in the religious house at Vitreuil.

As for Nurse Vincent, she puzzled and puzzled yet more. At last she made up her mind, fully and irrevocably, according to her mental way of putting it, that she would drop the whole matter. The girl was nothing to her; she was a mere unit in the great stream of life, a drop in the ocean of humanity. She did not want to be helped, or she knew that it was impossible that she could be helped. She would let it all drop, put it out of her mind, wouldn't worry herself about it any more.

In this frame of mind she went off to her first case after her day spent with Marty. It was a heavy case, involving careful watching at night, but somehow, after two or three days, Marty's little piquant face began to haunt Nurse Vincent with a persistence which very soon made her worry more than ever.

"I can't get that girl out of my mind," she said to herself, after a vain attempt to dismiss Marty into the limbo of utter forgetfulness. "I can't get her out of my head. I wish I could; she's nothing to me. But to think of that young life being wasted among those silly women at the convent. It's wicked, it's iniquitous. And yet, what could I do? I wish I had gone straight to Mrs Etherington and asked her to tell me who the photograph was—yes, I do. But there, the daughter took care that I never had the chance. Never did she let me get out on the chance of going in and tackling her mother. She knew I suspected her. I've seen her watching me over and over again. There was a flash in her eye which

meant that I was dangerous. I let the flash warn me off danger, like the fool I was. When I've got through this case I'll have the little woman up to Paris for the day again."

Accordingly, when nurse was through the case—at least, when she knew that she would be leaving three days later—she wrote to Marty and asked her to come up and spend another day with her. "Don't think you are coming as a kindness to yourself," she wrote. "It would be the greatest kindness to me. In spite of my having been so many years in Paris, I am somewhat of a lonely woman. I don't take to everybody; I took to you. So come and spend the day with me next Thursday or Friday."

For the three days that she remained at her case nurse had no reply. Then, when she got back to the nursing home, she found a letter in a very shaky and straggly handwriting.

"That isn't the little girl's writing!" she exclaimed as she took up the envelope and saw that the postmark was Vitreuil.

The letter proved to be from Sœur Angelique.

"Mrs Johnson asked me to write and tell you, dear nurse," she wrote, "that she is grateful and so much obliged to you for your kind invitation for Thursday or Friday. She is, however, unable to accept it, as at the present time she is laid up with an attack of the measles, which will keep her confined to her room for at least a fortnight. We have had measles in the school, and Mrs Johnson has been most good in helping to nurse the sick children. She has, however, fallen a victim herself, and we are all very anxious about her."

Immediately on receipt of this letter Nurse Vincent went off to Vitreuil, and satisfied herself that Marty was really seriously ill.

"Now look here, my young lady," she said before she left her, "you'll make me a solemn promise. You'll promise me before I leave that you'll do nothing to hinder the course of your recovery."

"What do you mean?" said Marty.

"I mean that measles is a simple matter for children —not always so simple for them. It's a well-defined, natural sort of illness. Do you know what I mean? You have a certain eruption, you keep warm, you have a certain amount of fever, perhaps a touch of bronchitis, and you keep warm and get well; that's the normal run of measles. A little older you have a good deal more fever, perhaps not so much rash, perhaps a little more bronchitis; you don't take quite so much care, you are more on your own, and you don't get well. You know that as well as I do. You're a sensible girl, now you promise me that you'll stop in your bed, you'll take what's given to you, you'll play no tricks; or else I shall just take off my bonnet and I shall stop here till you are better."

Marty laughed outright. It was a wan, almost a disfiguring laugh, but it was a laugh all the same. "Nurse," she said, "I'll do nothing foolish. I'm not going to commit suicide, don't be alarmed. They'll bring me *tisane* and *tisane* and *tisane*, as they've been doing, and I shall lie here and sweat and sweat and sweat."

"And by-and-by," put in nurse, "you'll be properly cooked. Now, as long as I'm satisfied of that there's no need for me to stop, so I won't exhaust you by re-

maining any longer. I shall come down and see you again in a few days."

She went back to Paris more puzzled than ever, and just as the train was running into the station a sudden bright thought came to her. "I'll do it!" she said, "I'll do it! I'll write to Mrs Etherington to-night and put the question to her plainly."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

JOY COMETH IN THE MORNING

It happened that George Etherington had not been round to his mother's house for several days. The long strain of anxiety, the hopelessness of the months which had worn away without any definite news of Marty, had told upon him terribly; and he clung to his mother-in-law in a way which was nothing short of pathetic.

"I suppose I must go and see my mother," he said to her at breakfast one morning. "Here's a note from her asking me to come. She says I'm neglecting her. I suppose I am."

"Oh, you are; yes, dear, you are," said Mrs Benyon. "I think she's been very good and patient about it."

"I'm sure she has," said George, "very good and very patient. She wants me to dine with her tonight. You'll not mind, Mater, will you?"

"Mind, my dear boy? She's your own mother, your own dear mother. And I'm sure," she said, with a dry, hard sob rising in her throat, "if she'd been my Marty's mother over and over again she could not have been kinder and more sympathetic. I thought, George, when I first saw your mother, that she was such a grand lady, too grand for me to have anything to do with, quite out of my line.

I was a little afraid of her; I thought she looked down upon me and despised me, as she had every right to do. But I've found since then that a haughty manner may mean little or nothing. Go to her, George. You have only one mother; don't neglect her."

So that evening, on his return from his usual peregrination to the establishment of Mr Spruce, George Etherington went back to Rosediamond Road, dressed himself, and then went round to his mother's house. He found her sitting by the open window in the drawing-room, overlooking the pleasant garden.

"Ah, is that you, George, dear?" she said. "I thought you had forgotten me."

"No, mother, no. It's very wrong of me to give you the trouble of hunting me up, but I hope you'll forgive me."

"Oh, my dear boy, if I never have to forgive any of you anything worse than that, we shall do very well. By the way," she added, "I have had such an extraordinary letter this evening."

"A letter? From whom?"

"From the nurse—you know, that was with your sister and Dick."

"Yes, I saw her once. A capable, bustling kind of person."

"An excellent nurse. She understood them down to the very ground."

"Well, what did she write to you about?"

"It's the most extraordinary letter I ever had," said his mother. "You had better read it for yourself."

The letter was written in an angular hand, and read thus:—

"Dear Mrs Etherington,—At the risk of your thinking me a meddlesome fool or a hopeless lunatic I am writing to ask you a question which I have been longing to put ever since the first time I entered your house, which was when I came to fetch Mrs Piers, the first time that she had tea with you after her accident. Do you know a Mrs Johnson?—"

"Mrs Johnson?" repeated George.

"I don't know a Mrs Johnson," said his mother, "not one."

"I have a particular reason for asking," the letter went on. "And will you tell me the name of the young lady whose photograph stands on the bureau to the right of the fireplace in your drawing-room? The frame is of silver, very massive and handsome. The young lady in it wears a white dress, cut low, and has quantities of hair framing a rather child-like face. I generally noticed that it was lying downwards upon its face. I hope you'll forgive me for asking these questions; it isn't done with any idea of intrusion.—Believe me, dear Mrs Etherington, faithfully yours, Harriet Vincent."

"Whose photograph is that, mother?"

Mrs Etherington looked up at him with an expression that was one of mingled surprise and reproach. "*You* should know, my dear boy. You gave me both photograph and frame yourself."

"Do you mean Marty?"

"I mean Marty."

"But Marty's photograph doesn't lie face down."

"Well, it's a most extraordinary thing," said Mrs Etherington, "that over and over again I have come

into the drawing-room and found Marty's photograph face down behind that one of Effie in her bridal dress."

"You don't think—?" began George.

"I don't think because I don't know what to think, I don't suspect because I don't know what to suspect, but these questions must be answered explicitly. There's more in it than meets the eye. Nurse Vincent came from France, George; Effie came from France; Mrs Johnson was the name of the nurse who nursed Effie in the convent—the amateur nurse. I think you had better take a little trip to Paris, my dear boy, and you had better find out what Nurse Vincent has in her mind. You could take the photograph and the frame with you, and you could explain better than I can exactly who the young lady is."

George Etherington did not answer. His mother, who was knitting hard at her smart silk sock, did not look up for a minute or two. Then, struck by his silence, she raised her eyes, and saw that he had fainted dead away.

To tear at the bell and summon help was the work of an instant. "Get some brandy-and-soda quickly! Call Colonel Etherington! Mr George is very ill. Call Alice. Tell her to bring down a cold sponge."

The colonel came rushing in and one of the boys and among them they soon pulled George back to his own senses again.

"I can't think," he said, "what made me go off in that curious way. I never did such a thing in my life. The heat has been awful lately, hasn't it?"

"Don't talk, my dear boy. Drink this," said the colonel. "Take a good gulp of it. It won't hurt you."

So George took another gulp of the revivifying fluid and drew a deep breath or two, as if he wanted to make up for lost time.

"You have gone a little too long, dear boy," said his mother. "Don't stand between him and the air, Bertie."

"I feel quite like an exhibition," said George. Then suddenly remembrance came back to him, and he swung himself out of his chair. "I—I must go," he said, looking all round. "I haven't a minute to spare!"

"My dear boy," said his mother, pressing him down again, "you'll do nothing of the kind. You'll not stir from this house till you have eaten your dinner. Your brothers will go round to Rosediamond Road and pack your portmanteau presently, and ask Mrs Benyon to come round here and say good-bye to you. I'm going with you. There's plenty of time; there's no need to flurry. You can't start for Paris until the boat train leaves Victoria. Your father—"

"Hadn't I better go?" said the colonel

"No, my dear, you stay in London. You've got to go to-morrow morning and see George's chief. Still better, take a cab the moment you have had your dinner and try and get at him to-night. By-the-bye, you could do it now, on the telephone."

"I'll ring him up at once," said the colonel.

It was but the work of a few minutes to arrange by that convenient medium, the telephone, that George should have a week's leave. And then they sat down together, and Mrs Etherington, who had forbidden George to say a word until he had eaten enough to satisfy her, issued her orders.

"Now I want you, while I'm away, to do certain

things," she said, looking round at her family with a swift, comprehensive glance including the two maids who were waiting. "First of all, I don't wish a soul outside this house to know that I am away, not even my own daughter. You'll remember if Mrs Piers comes that I am out. I want you to keep up the deception—if it is a deception," she added to her husband. "Not a single word to anybody. We're going off on what may be a reasonable clue, or what may be a mere wild-goose chase, and I don't wish anybody to be the wiser unless we succeed."

She talked on and on until the meal was over and she was satisfied that George had eaten enough. Then she hustled one of his brothers off to pack his portmanteau, and to bring it back in a cab together with Mrs Benyon.

"Dear Mrs Benyon," she said, as that trembling woman entered the house, "George has to go to Paris on business for a few days. Oh, no, no, no definite clue; but I want to go to Paris, and he has business, so we are going to make a little trip together. I have decided very suddenly on going, so you'll forgive his running away like this. I'll deliver him up quite safe and sound in a few days."

She was a wonderful woman. She never faltered or swerved in the line which she had marked out for herself until they were safely started on their journey. Even then she took all the responsibilities upon herself; saw to everything, and proved herself an admirable traveller, as a soldier's wife should be.

So, to Nurse Vincent's astonishment, her letter to Mrs Etherington was answered by that lady in person.

"You wrote me a letter, nurse," she said.

"I did."

"I thought it best to answer it in person. You want to know who this girl is," pointing to the photograph, which she had brought with her. "Who do you think she is?"

"I know her as Mrs Johnson," said nurse.

"I thought as much," said Mrs Etherington, "I thought as much. Then, nurse, I can enlighten you. That is not Mrs Johnson; she is my son's wife—Mrs George Etherington. We have sought her—oh, for months, poor child! Where is she?"

"She is at the convent, of course."

"Then it was she who helped to nurse my daughter?"

"Yes. I knew that Mrs Piers knew her; I could see it."

"And Mr Piers?"

"I couldn't say. I should fancy not. He gave me no clue to it in his manner."

"And she's at the convent now?"

"She's at the convent now. She has been suffering from measles. She's very worn, very different to that photograph. It will break your heart to see her."

"It doesn't matter about my heart," said Mrs Etherington, "as long as it doesn't break my son's heart or hers. Our hearts can take care of themselves very well. I must go and tell my son. He's waiting outside in the carriage for me. Do you think they'll let him in? He's been so anxious. She's hidden herself so completely. She had an idea that she wasn't good enough for him! I don't know where she got it, nor how she got it, nor when, excepting that it was some time on their honeymoon. The idea is preposterous. She's charming, devoted,

everything that we could wish for our son's wife. And he's madly in love with her, nurse, madly in love. It's a poor wreck that I've brought over from London to Paris, and I'm so afraid when I tell him the news it may kill him. He fainted dead away over your letter last night. I told him, I pieced it together; I knew in a moment. I don't know what he'll say."

"Joy never kills," said Nurse Vincent, quietly.

"I'll go and fetch him in," said his mother.

But George did not faint this time. On the contrary, he caught hold of Nurse Vincent's hand and shook it up and down like a veritable pump-handle. "I'll thank you afterwards," he said. "At present I would like to know which is the best way to get to Vitreuil."

He had no doubt of his reception, no doubt that once brought face to face with Marty he would be able to dispel all the clouds which had parted them for so many months. And he was right, for perfect love casteth out fear.

It was just a couple of hours later that the three—George, his mother and Nurse Vincent—drove up to the convent in a *voiture*. Sœur Angelique came to them in the *parloir*. Mrs Johnson, she told them, was already much better. She was indeed, for the first time, sitting up that day in an armchair by the open window.

"I suppose she's in her own room," said Nurse Vincent. "If so, I want to take this gentleman up to see her."

"Up to see her?" said Sœur Angelique.

"He has every right to go and see her," said Nurse Vincent, quietly. "He is her husband."

The good Sister stood on one side with a gesture implying to George that he could pass on. Nurse Vincent led the way across the *cour*, up the staircase and into the corridor which led to Marty's room.

"Well, my dear," she said, as she opened the door, "you are better?"

"Oh, yes, nurse, much better, thank you. I don't think the attack was half as bad as you thought it was going to be."

"I'm glad of that. You see you were wise."

"Yes, yes, I was quite wise. You thought I was going to commit suicide over it, didn't you?"

"Not a bit of it. I only warned you. I'm glad to see you so well, dear child, because I've brought somebody to see you."

"Who?" cried Marty.

She got up unsteadily from her chair. Some instinct told her who it was on the other side of the door. There was a scuffle, a rush, a cry, a sound of sobbing, and then no more, for Nurse Vincent was standing on the other side of the door, crying as if her heart would break.

THE END

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